Affective Lifeworlds: Iranian Gamers vs the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines the complex relationship between Iranian gamers and state Internet control policies through the lens of digital ethnography. Drawing on four years of fieldwork, the research investigates how Iranians navigate state information controls, particularly in response to the controversial Internet User Protection Bill. Through analysis of memes, digital artifacts, and resistance practices during the Woman Life Freedom movement in 2022, the study reveals how gamers construct alternative digital spaces and develop tactical responses to state surveillance. The research makes three significant contributions to scholarly literature. First, it advances understanding of cyberspace and ICTs by demonstrating digital technologies' dual nature as tools for citizen empowerment and state repression. Second, it enriches Middle Eastern game studies by providing one of the few ethnographic accounts of Iranian gaming communities, illuminating how virtual spaces become sites of cultural and political negotiation. Third, it extends affect theory by examining how gamers' emotional and social experiences shape their responses to digital authoritarianism. Through a multi-sited ethnographic approach combining qualitative methods, the study reveals how Iranian gamers create affective lifeworlds that enable resistance and normalcy under systemic constraints. The findings demonstrate how technological

adaptation and digital resistance practices emerge within authoritarian contexts, contributing to broader discussions of digital sovereignty, sociotechnical systems, and the global affectosphere.

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Lastly: برای زن، زندگی، آزادی.

Introduction

This ethnographic study focuses on Iranian gamers as a framework to elucidate the relationship between Internet access and online community culture in the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). I analyze how gamers circumvent information controls to play games with one another despite the fear of and/or the experience of violent reprimand by the state, such as mass incarceration, media censorship, and Internet shutdowns, all of which are techniques often used to suppress dissent and cover up crimes against civilians. By examining Iranian gamer lifeworlds through the lenses of soft power and affect, I demonstrate how Iranians utilize humor as a means of resilience in the face of precarity. Through community building, such as fostering guild relationships and creating a humor-based culture, Iranians reclaim their sense of agency in response to the IRI's tried-and-true method of *jang-e narm* (soft war), which aims to stymie Western ideas entering Iran and dissent within the country (Blout 2017; Shahnahpur 2021).

My research, therefore, accounts for how gamers salvage their dignity in the face of human rights abuses. Barriers to internet access lead to the pursuit of the ordinary through means of protest, from online meme culture and TikTok trends in Iran to circumvention techniques like virtual private networks (VPNs). The urgency of this dissertation, therefore, stems from the IRI's ongoing efforts to control citizens online and offline through suppressive methods of Internet filtering (restricting or banning access to platforms and content), throttling (deliberately slowing down the Internet), and Internet shutdowns, an extension of state media control strategies since the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. Attempts to control the flow of information continue to be thwarted by Internet citizens like gamers in the face of miserable conditions due to draconian government policies that often lead to brutal suppression against peaceful protestors.

Public discontent towards the IRI erupted in September 2022 after the killing of Mahsa Jina Amini by the *gasht-e ershad* (Morality Police) for not wearing her hijab correctly, creating a

cascade of protestors across districts, which are ongoing.[1] Authorities initially responded by shutting down the Internet in 80 cities and blocking the online PC game *DOTA 2*, all XBOX games, *Clash of Clans*, and Discord, an online instant messaging and voice social platform for (trans)national communication for Iranian gamers. Instances like the 2022 blackout violate fundamental human rights, including freedom of expression and access to information, which is not only a disruption but causes incalculable damage to citizens in material and immaterial ways. Internet shutdowns often go hand-in-hand with suppressive methods on the ground. Within a year, there were approximately 22,000 unlawfully imprisoned and over 500 citizens violently killed throughout the Woman Life Freedom protests.[2] As I analyze the relationship between Iranian gamers, censorship, and the state's territorialization of the Internet, I reveal how people transform their lives while pursuing ordinary human rights, often taken for granted in the West.

The dissertation comprises one central argument. Gaming in Iran is more than entertainment; it is a form of resistance against state control, in which Iranian gamers employ three main strategies:

1) Technical circumvention
2) Community building
3) Humor

I situate gaming as a form of everyday resistance, or quiet encroachment, against state authority, even though most see it as a leisure activity (Scott 1985; Bayat 2009). Asef Bayat's term of quiet encroachment offers another analytic way to look at on-the-ground or digital tactics in response

[1] This law enforcement body in Iran was created in 2005 to enforce regulations on modest dress (*hijab*) and chaste behavior (*'ifaf*). After the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, the Islamic Revolution Committees, referred to as Komiteh, existed as social services, security, and police. In particular, Komiteh functioned much like the Islamic religious police until the Morality Police was founded.

[2] "The late Mahsa Amini is named a finalist for the EU's top human rights prize." 2023. The Associated Press. https://apnews.com/article/eu-sakharov-prize-mahsa-amini-finalists-91e48503857b7133210d3b29cb686f71

to soft war strategies to control information. I draw from Bayat's notion of quiet encroachment to suggest that Iranian gaming communities engage in gradual, persistent practices that steadily expand their digital autonomy and challenge state control. Gaming as a form of quiet encroachment is characterized by subtle, cumulative acts that challenge state authority without overt confrontation. My dissertation connects this theme of gamer quiet encroachment from 2020 to 2024, capturing moments like the Woman Life Freedom movement. It shows that online gaming is a space of socio-political resistance despite government restrictions and oppression. These actions, from platform modifications and establishing encrypted alternative communication channels to forming transnational in-game networks, promote a gradual assertion of digital autonomy. By transforming leisure spaces into forums for alternative discourses, gaming thus becomes a form of resistance, reflecting a modern iteration of subversive practices that disrupt the homogenizing forces of the state.

A. Field Site and Research Motivation

I conducted my dissertation's fieldwork primarily in the virtual spaces of online gaming platforms and social media, with one notable offline interaction. Most of the research was conducted through digital ethnography, utilizing platforms such as *DOTA 2*, *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), Reddit, Twitch, and Twitter. Much of the voice-to-voice or screen-to-screen interaction across these platforms is made possible with Discord, which is a voice and instant messaging social platform that gamers use for online discussion. These virtual spaces serve as critical arenas for political discourse, cultural negotiation, and community building among Iranian and Iranian-American gamers. The choice of these platforms reflects their significance as sites where transregional political dialogues unfold, often shaped by the constraints of digital

authoritarianism. I draw on Marc Owen Jones's concept of digital authoritarianism, which refers to the infrastructure placed to exert power over citizens by leveraging surveillance and control over digital technology to impact socio-cultural relations within a given state.[3]

My journey into dissecting socio-political dimensions of online gaming is for personal and professional reasons. I first became motivated to research Iranian gamers online due to my long history of playing video games, especially *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), since 2004. Around 2016-2017, I was playing with a top 100 *WoW* guild when I met an Iranian gamer. That summer, my interest was piqued even more when I studied Arabic in Jordan and noted the popularity of the augmented reality game Pokémon GO. I also found the research on gamers in the Middle East to be lacking, as most scholars had written about Middle East video game narratives (Šisler 2008; Saber & Webber 2016; Šisler & Mohseni 2017). From this genuine curiosity, I identified a field site that aligned with my interests outside of academia. I believe this provided a dual position in the research. My dual positionality, being an insider to gaming communities while remaining an outsider to Iranian culture, created a unique methodological vantage point that enables an intimate understanding of gaming practices and a critical analytical distance, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of cultural dynamics that might otherwise be overlooked by researchers positioned solely as insiders or outsiders (Abu-Lughod 1985, 1991; Milligan 2014; Abidin 2020, 2021). As an insider to gaming communities and knowing Iranian gamers, I was aware of gaming culture that others would find challenging without that background and skill base. At the same time, I am not Iranian, so navigating the relationship of being an outsider to

[3] Marc Owen Jones defines digital authoritarianism as a "transnational endeavour" that constitutes "new digital powers" with a reach across nodes or hubs to "project their influence electronically" (2022: 11). MENA-based state actors are accordingly able to have such a projection of power over others, whether IRI over citizens and the diaspora or other nation-states in the region, because of the "technologies and human resources from China, Europe, and North America." While I do not necessarily disagree with this statement, I do want to posit a less hierarchical view of state-to-state interaction that affords state agency so that there can be more accountability for a given state's digital authoritarianism.

Iranian culture called for critical self-reflection but also provided analytical distance to the research.

My positionality as a gamer has both enriched the dissertation research and had an impact on it. I am a committed gamer when I have not been researching and writing this dissertation, which feeds into this work. I have acquired personal experience, having actively played and competed in online gaming environments for over two decades, shaping both my theoretical perspectives and practical methods. This background allows me to access and understand the intricate digital practices of Iranian gamers, but it also requires me to interrogate the limits of my positionality continuously. While shared gaming experiences have enabled deep engagement with participants, they necessitate a critical awareness of inherent differences in cultural, socio-economic, and political contexts between my background and that of Iranian gamers. To navigate these differences, I have employed reflexivity throughout my research process. I use structured reflective practices to ensure that my interpretations are accountable to and informed by the participants' self-representations. My approach is rooted in a commitment to situate my own digital life within broader socio-political dynamics. I view my role as both a facilitator and a mediator, bridging academic theory and the lived experiences of those facing digital precarity. By foregrounding my positionality, I aim to clarify how my insider status as a gamer informs data collection and analysis. I also acknowledge that this perspective has limitations that continuously shape this study's narrative and theoretical insights.

Embodying this dual position allowed me to build relationships with the participants, striking a balance between empathetic engagement and scholarly distance. However, true objectivity is not possible in ethnographic research. Therefore, holding myself accountable for internal bias has been a prudent process. For instance, I am very familiar with *WoW* and was

originally hellbent on conducting participant observation only on that gaming platform in conjunction with any data collected from social media. However, Iranians consistently experienced issues accessing *WoW* compared to other video games, such as *DOTA 2*. I did my best to capture the essence of *DOTA 2* in the research. Another challenge was to avoid projecting my own experiences as a female gamer onto other female gamers, even though all my female participants have encountered negative gender-based dynamics online. Beyond gender, the participants mostly felt gaming was not political, so regular debriefing on my assumptions was necessary. We collectively agreed that while their individual choices to play games are not political but rather a choice to build community and spend time with friends, external forces like the Iranian government's Internet and information controls, as well as US sanctions, made acts like joy, meaning playing games, a sphere to suppress, similar to dancing, singing, and holding hands with the opposite sex. Hence, my research emphasizes the politics of the ordinary.

The politics of the ordinary refers to the way everyday experiences, mundane practices, and seemingly insignificant actions are fundamentally linked to political dynamics. I use this concept to illustrate that challenging the state goes beyond extraordinary acts, even if these acts are often felt apolitical, i.e., memes. In essence, I demonstrate that cultural artifacts and moments exist beyond linear political binaries, and thus, meanings, memories, and identities are constructed over time. And at the same time, even those who are uninterested in politics may be introducing a counterculture or even de-territorializing "the temporal, spatial, and thematic parameters of this milieu's life in relation to authoritative discourse" (Yurchak 2005: 158-161). The politics of the ordinary challenge traditional views that only formal political institutions or overt protests have political weight, suggesting instead that the collective, everyday acts of ordinary individuals can contest power and shape social change. For instance, Asef Bayat's

(2009) work on “quiet encroachment” demonstrates how ordinary citizens, through everyday acts of resistance and adaptation, can influence societal transformation without engaging in formal political campaigns. Similarly, Kathleen Stewart (2010) emphasizes how everyday practices and media representations subtly produce political effects, highlighting that the social realm is imbued with political significance even when it appears non-confrontational. In the dissertation, I show that the authoritarian state’s goal is to control the entire Iranian population by suppressing alternative perspectives on governance, especially ideas coming from outside of Iran. Thus, joy can be described as a political act, especially when oppressive systems prevent freedom of expression, such as human emotions or mundane, ordinary acts.

My research examines Iranian political discourses that emerge in virtual spaces as reactions to or resistance against the pervasive reach of digital authoritarianism across the Internet. Through my work, I have observed among participants how state-imposed digital controls, surveillance measures, and restrictive policies shape online narratives and catalyze alternative forms of political expression. Despite facing systemic efforts to codify and constrain their everyday digital interactions—efforts aimed at steering narratives to serve ulterior political purposes—Iranian gamers and online activists carve out online spaces (Keshavarznia 2024; Aryan et al. 2013). This systematic regulation is evident in Iran’s ongoing development of its National Information Network infrastructure, alongside intensified Internet restrictions during periods of social unrest and expanding digital surveillance measures (Mahoozi 2023). In this digital tension, the remarkable resilience of Iranian digital communities is most vividly displayed. Despite facing systemic efforts to codify and constrain their everyday digital interactions—efforts aimed at steering narratives to serve ulterior political purposes—Iranian gamers and online activists carve out online spaces. Gamers in Iran keep finding new ways to

hang out online. Some build their chat rooms in Discord. Others meet up within game worlds. Whatever works to keep the community going. Moreover, it is not easy with all the restrictions, but users make it work. They have become resourceful by using VPNs to dodge censorship, encrypting their messages, and jumping to new platforms when needed. For them, it is not just about gaming anymore. These spaces have become places to talk politics, hold onto their culture, and push back against repression. My research shows how these gaming communities have become battlegrounds between government control and grassroots resistance. When we look at how gamers adapt and find ways around barriers, we see something more significant – how communities under pressure can use technology to take back some control and tell their own stories, even in tightly regulated spaces, as evidenced by Iran's ongoing development of its National Information Network infrastructure.[4]

I met one of the gamers in Seattle several times between 2020 and 2022. We would grab coffee or food, and it was eye-opening to see how differently she acted compared to when she was online back home. Sitting in that corner café, away from the watchful eyes she was used to in Iran, she opened up. You could see the weight lift off her shoulders – she could finally talk about anything without looking over his shoulder. My position informed my choice of field sites, as both an insider to gaming communities and an outsider to Iranian culture played a pivotal role in accessing and interpreting these spaces. This positioning allowed for the development of trust and rapport with participants that may otherwise be difficult for a non-gamer.

[4] "A look at the process of completing the national information network." (2023). ISNA. https://www.isna.ir/news/1402010601938/%D9%86%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%87%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D8%AF-%D8%AA%DA%A9%D9%85%DB%8C%D9%84-%D8%B4%D8%A8%DA%A9%D9%87-%D9%85%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AA

B. Contributions to the Literature and Theoretical Frameworks

The dissertation significantly contributes to Middle East studies by informing three fields of literature: cyberspace and information and communication technology (ICT), gamer studies, and affective entanglements.

1. Cyberspace and ICTs: From Digital Authoritarianism to Resistance in the Middle East

I contribute to scholarly works on cyberspace and information and communication technology, particularly those focusing on political impacts on Internet access and resistance. My dissertation explores the intricate dynamics of digital resistance and authoritarianism in Iran. By focusing on how digital tools have reshaped socio-political landscapes from a balanced perspective, I provide nuance to the existing literature on the Internet and digital media by showing the dual role of digital technologies in empowering citizens and enabling state repression. Throughout my study, I have examined other scholarly case studies on the MENA region and have found the argument that technology is more often wielded for oppression than it is to liberate or empower to be a more compelling thought.

In the digital age, state power has grown stronger, leading to what some call "repression 2.0" (Seib 2012:97). My research looks at how digital technologies can empower and repress, trying to bridge this gap. Scholars like Castells (2019) have pointed out that technology does not just help people communicate, but it also deepens divisions. Online platforms often create echo chambers where the loudest voices, sometimes far-right groups, dominate. These spaces turn politics into an "us versus them" battle, which is not random. It is tied to how these platforms are designed and used, which can unintentionally amplify divisive rhetoric. At the same time, ICTs

are used by governing bodies to repress citizens' rights.[5] Scholars argue that the emancipatory promise of technology is overshadowed by state technological advances that enable the repression of its citizenry (Shaheed 2021: 8). That creates a "top-down" vision for states to control a region and thus ultimately bolster narratives of power and control (Jones 2022: 95). While cyber law may lag behind the most up-to-date technological advances, it manages to cut down freedom of opinion and choice (Wheeler 2017: 132).[6]

The existing literature on digital resistance and authoritarianism in the Middle East is extensive, with scholars such as Deborah L. Wheeler (2017), Jeffrey Goldfarb (2006), Asef Bayat (2009), and Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi (1994) providing foundational insights. Scholars like Goldfarb (2006) and Bayat (2009) noticed something interesting - political change often starts with everyday actions, especially in countries with strict government control. During the Green Revolution, for example, people used essential communication tools to make a considerable impact (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi 1994). But here is the thing: while it is evident how people resist, there is still much to understand about how authoritarian governments fight against digital activism. My dissertation adds to the conversation by examining the interplay between state repression and citizen empowerment (Kalathil & Boas 2003; Calingaert 2010; MacKinnon 2011; Morozov 2011), providing a comprehensive analysis of the socio-political implications of digital technologies in the MENA region (Wheeler 2017; Soliman 2022; Jones 2022). I especially look to Rebecca

[5] ICTs encompass a variety of tools that afford the user the ability to connect online via computers, Internet, networking, and telecommunications.

[6] A temporary TikTok ban brought many Americans to Rednote in January 2025. A major part of the discourse is the differences between the US and China. Chinese netizens said, "you may have freedom of opinion, but not freedom of choice," remarking on the challenges US citizens face with housing, medical care, and cost of living.

MacKinnon (2011)[7] and Marc Owen Jones (2022),[8] alongside others' work, to flesh out the concept of networked and digital authoritarianism as a broader analytical framework for the various government agencies' activities in Iran to censor and shut down the Internet.

Although some scholarly works have argued a more nuanced and balanced perspective on the role of technology between oppressors and oppressed (Al Lily & Alhazmi 2020; Nemer 2022), many scholars also argue the transformative power of digital technologies to uplift social movements through its less hierarchical and more participatory nature (Castells 2012:15). Thus, some scholars argue that social media platforms have somehow democratized information dissemination and mobilization to enable grassroots movements to push back against authoritarian regimes (Shirky 2011). The evidence suggests otherwise, as my dissertation and others demonstrate that there is not, in fact, a democratizing effect through the use of social media, nor does it have emancipatory impacts for users (Becker 2004;[9] Fuchs 2009; Morozov 2011; Olaniran & Williams 2020; Jones 2022).[10] In other words, social media networks do not trigger revolutions. Still, Big Tech corporations use "the myth of social media as an Arab Spring

[7] In Rebecca MacKinnon's "Liberation Technology: China's 'Networked Authoritarianism," she uses the term "networked authoritarianism" to describe the state's control over websites and social-networking services wherein Chinese officials follow Chinese citizens' chats. While citizens may impact the government's policies by voicing their opinions online, a networked authoritarian state is likely to suppress and jail citizens or even manipulate online conversations (2011: 33).

[8] In Marc Owen Jones' *Digital Authoritarianism in the Middle East* (2022), he defines "digital authoritarianism" a bit differently than "networked authoritarianism." This is because "networked authoritarianism" is limited to the single state, whereas "digital authoritarianism" is more about the interrelationship between states. Networked authoritarianism may be controlled openness, co-opting technology and public discourse, and a blended or hybrid approach. Digital authoritarianism consists of broader control over society, including mass surveillance, censorship, and cyberwarfare. Another way to think about it is that network authoritarianism is more domestic, whereas digital authoritarianism consists of global strategies. Therefore, I mostly use the term digital authoritarianism throughout the dissertation. I also employ other terms like networked affect and networked lifeworlds for participants because of their interrelationships with other Iranian gamers.

[9] According to Jonathan Becker in "Lessons from Russia: A Neo-Authoritarian Media System" (2004), Vladimir Putin's attempt to use any type of democratizing effect within the media is a facade or in other words "formal democratic institutions may appear to exist, but they are rotten at their core."

[10] The Arab Spring's wave toward democratization, known for emancipation through social media, was only successful in Tunisia and even that country reverted back to an authoritarian regime.

platform to their benefit," lining their pockets by boosting numbers, engagement, and the veneer of free speech (Guesmi 2021). Recent studies on the Arab Spring further this theory by recognizing how censorship and Internet shutdowns assist methods of digital deception while also criminalizing free speech rather than promoting democracy (Kharroub 2015, 2022; Dragu & Lupu 2021; Mantelllassi 2023). Despite social movements' use of digital technologies and social media to mobilize against authoritarian governments, crackdowns and repression intensify in cyberspace (Kalathil 2020; Earl et al. 2022; Jones 2022, 2023; Kjærstad 2023).

My research shows that cyberspace and digital tools should not be perceived as emancipatory in themselves. Digital tools are much faster communication models but mirror the use of old media for repressive tactics. What makes citizens able to quell governmental control has more to do with an affective atmosphere that the users create than just merely the (digital) tools themselves.[11] Government authoritarianism can successfully quell citizens through state-sanctioned violence, information acquisition of the population, information controls, or all the above (Shahbaz 2018). My work challenges the notion of digital exceptionalism by demonstrating how contemporary digital control mechanisms reflect historical patterns of media repression.

Proponents of digital exceptionalism argue that the Internet represents a radical departure from previous communication technologies (Castells 2012). They suggest that digital tools have

[11] In this context, "affective atmosphere" refers to the overall mood and emotional tone that permeates a given digital or physical space and arises from the participants' collective affect. This atmosphere is not merely an individual feeling, but a shared, often subtle milieu that shapes perceptions, interactions, and resistance strategies. In digital environments, for example, gaming communities may generate an affective atmosphere that counters state-imposed negativity and cultivates a sense of collective resilience, camaraderie, and even quiet defiance. Drawing on existing scholarship, such as the work of Kathleen Stewart (2010) on ordinary affect and affective atmospheres, I argue that even under repressive digital authoritarian regimes, these emotionally charged environments enable forms of emergent resistance. They do so by creating communal bonds expressing joy and political dissent, thereby enriching the overall political dynamics within these online spaces.

unique properties that make them particularly effective for mobilizing dissent and challenging authoritarianism. Other scholars argue that this cybernetic utopia is a delusion. According to Evgeny Morozov, it is a flawed assumption that the net is liberating, in a cyber-utopic sense, because this logic has led people to face global consequences like authoritarianism (2011: xvii). My dissertation supports that digital deception is so rampant that information warfare occurs between citizens and the government, and the Internet is where this warfare is conducted. Thus, the Internet control system is complex.[12] Furthermore, this Internet control system is characterized by opaque decision-making processes and a specific infrastructure that enables the government to implement Internet shutdowns.[13]

[12] The Internet Protection Bill, for instance, hands control of Internet gateways to the armed forces and criminalizes VPN use. While the Supreme Council of Cyberspace passed parts of the bill, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, in cooperation with the Iranian Broadcasting Organization, the Iranian General Police Command, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance, and the Judiciary, are responsible for implementing and providing its materials, and submit the results to the country's National Cyberspace Center every three months. (See: Dadbazar's "Resolution of the Supreme Cyberspace Council on Combating Filter Violators")

[13] ARTICLE19. 2020. Iran: Tightening the Net After Blood and Shutdowns. London: ARTICLE19. Pp. 45. Available at: https://www.article19.org/ttn-iran-november-shutdown/

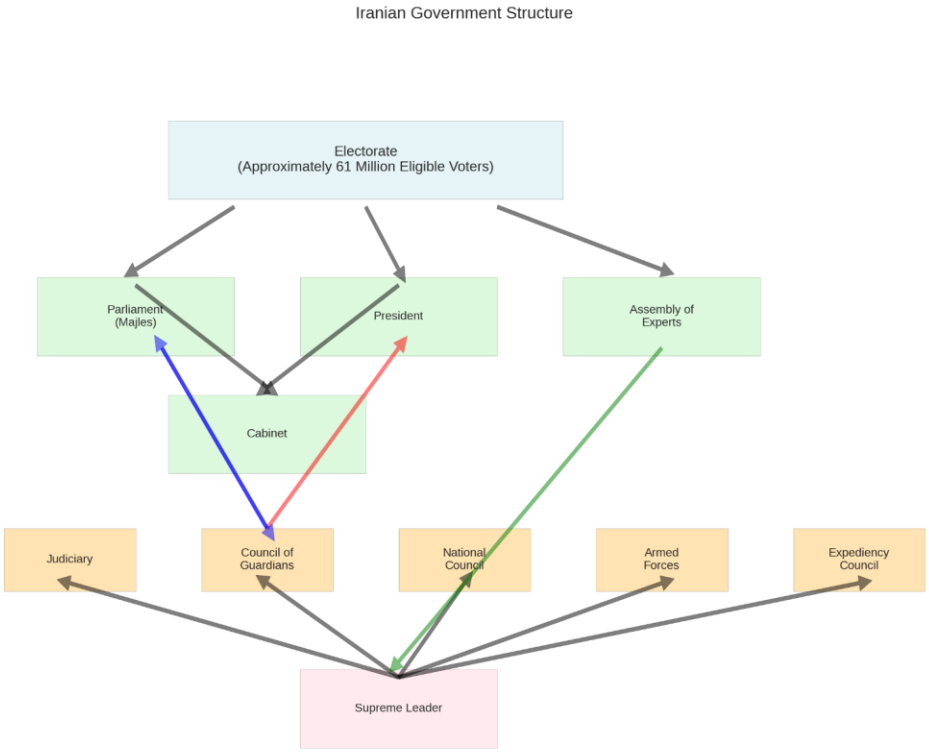

Figure 0.1 Breakdown of the essential government structure.

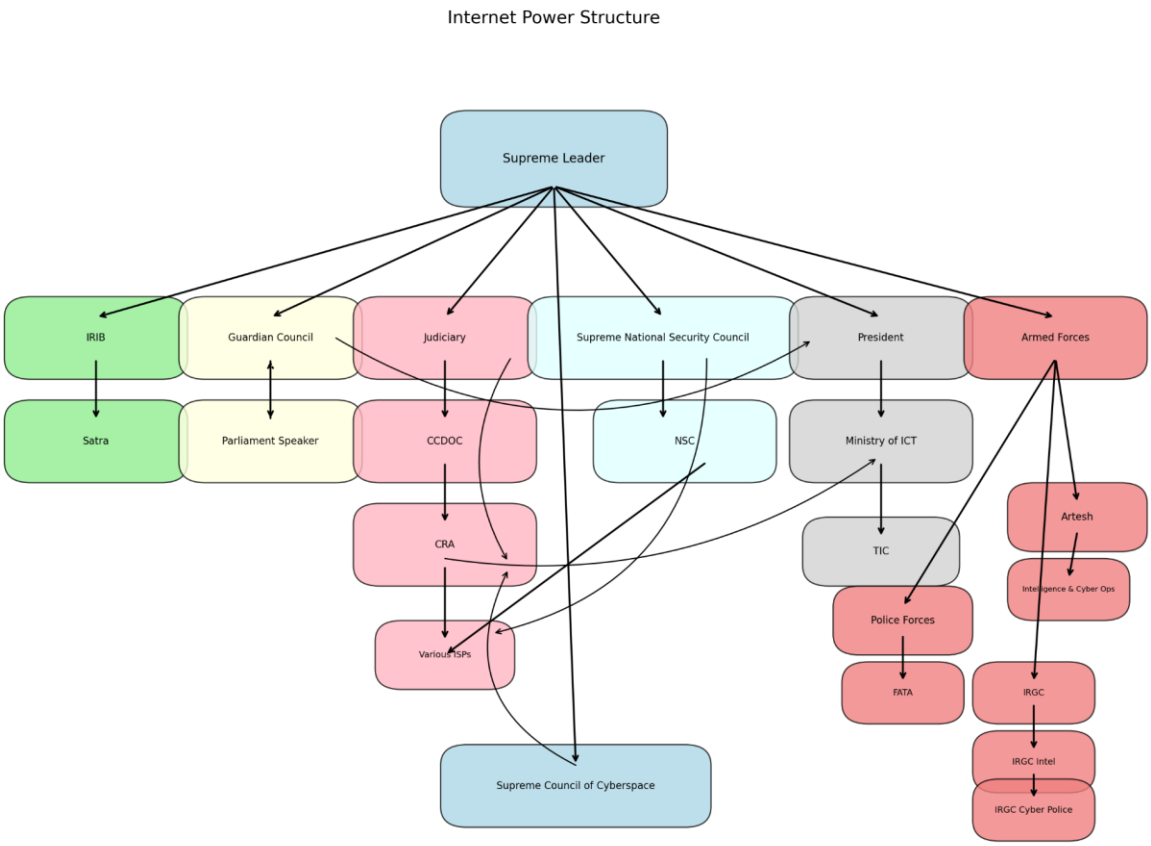

Figure 0.2. Breakdown of the Internet Power Structure[14]

Figures 0.1 and 0.2 show how Iran's Internet control works behind the scenes. VPN usage in Iran is a critical countermeasure to the state's digital repression. While the government has engineered its networks so that it can shut them down readily – a tactic vividly demonstrated during the 2022 Woman Life Freedom protests – citizens are increasingly relying on VPNs to bypass these shutdowns. The widespread use of VPNs allows Iranians to maintain access to independent news and social media and to voice dissent in environments where state-controlled networks dominate. This countermeasure not only underscores the resilience of citizen networks in circumventing state control but also emphasizes the ongoing digital tug-of-war, where

[14] I recreated a visual model from Article 19 on the complex Internet decision power structure in Iran, and how it is difficult to say what entity committed an Internet shutdown (see: Article 19's "Iran: Tightening the Net 2020," https://www.article19.org/ttn-iran-november-shutdown/).

technological ingenuity is pitted against increasingly sophisticated censorship and monitoring efforts.

Because my research adds to the larger body of literature on Middle East studies, I have looked to scholars who have focused on the Persian Gulf States, especially since those countries are Iran's neighbors. When considering the Persian Gulf States, it becomes clear that strategic allies with tech companies foster the campaign towards repression and authoritarianism. This is evident in the use of so-called neo-liberation technology like social media where "digital espionage, cyberbullying, industrial-level hate speech, content manipulation, and social engineering all plague the global digital space, and this is particularly the case in the Middle East" (Jones 2022: 24). On an even more insidious level, the tools of Israeli occupation are then exported around the world and bolstered by social media companies like Facebook's AI (Loewenstein 2024: 183). Mike Hynes (2021) shows how Big Tech shapes life in the Persian Gulf. The usual suspects - Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple – do not just dominate the market, but help authoritarian governments keep tabs on their people. Consequently, users lose their privacy and freedom in the process. The partnership between Big Tech and authoritarian states further illustrates how these companies provide tools for surveillance and control, often prioritizing profit over human rights (Jones 2023; Kjærstad 2023). Hynes and Marc Owen Jones are essential for understanding the external pressures and influences on Iran's digital policies and the complicity of global tech giants in enabling repression.

Damian Radcliffe (2018) examined how Persian Gulf governments are going digital. His research shows the efficiency of the government, and what is not working out well for these countries as they try to move their services online and interact with their citizens through apps and websites. Radcliffe elucidates that e-governance can create more transparency, openness,

and make civic life easier for citizens because more people can then be involved. The downside? Many services are slow to roll out or are not available yet. Many Persian Gulf countries are using these digital tools to work with citizens, but at the same time, they are using them for control.

My dissertation contributes to these studies on digital authoritarianism across cyberspace in three interrelated ways. First, it reorients the focus from Iranian gamer citizens while under authoritarian control within online engagement as a contrarian and contentious challenge toward that control. While not liberating, gaming can be described as making space for quiet encroachment (Bayat 2009). Wheeler's intervention on the role of social media suggests that even with a grumble of discontent in online spaces, fear barriers can be removed publicly and give way to active citizenship in public spaces (2017:79).

Zeynep Tufekci (2017) describes how social media platforms have fundamentally changed the dynamics of political mobilization during Turkey's Gezi Park protests. Tufekci suggests that these platforms allow activists to bypass traditional state-controlled media and reach wider audiences, facilitating rapid and large-scale mobilization. I concur that social media has played an essential role in political mobilization during the Turkish Gezi Park protests and the Arab Spring. However, there are limitations and challenges associated with these platforms. Social media is not always a powerful tool for change, especially since governments watch every post, block content, and spread their message. To understand if social media helps political movements, we must look at what protesters are experiencing on the ground. Moreover, I have also found social media to be just one part of the process of organizing protests.

Secondly, my dissertation examines how the Iranian government employs sophisticated Internet censorship and surveillance tactics to control the flow of information and suppress dissent. The dissertation builds on the work of scholars like Babak Rahimi (2015) and Farid

Shirazi (2014), who have explored the impact of Internet governance on civic engagement and democratic discourse in Iran. I extend this analysis by focusing on the affective lifeworlds of Iranian gamers, who use humor and community-building as forms of resistance against state repression. Affective lifeworlds are the emotionally charged arenas of lived experience where individuals' feelings, sensations, and embodied responses interlace with social, cultural, and digital contexts to shape meaning, identity, and collective action.[15]

Because I also examine the role of memes through virtual ethnography to understand how Iranians navigate and resist systemic constraints, my work informs the broader discussions on digital resistance and sociotechnical immersion. Viewing digital authoritarianism through the lens of the governed human reactions, rather than solely governing bodies' actions, constitutes reframing the narrative itself. I therefore build on a scholarship that critically examines Iran, US foreign policy, the diaspora, and the Islamic world by questioning reductive frameworks in the dominant discourses on what it means to be Iranian in online spaces (Akhavan 2013; Rahimi 2015; Khiabany 2018). My research shows that the resilient lifeworlds of online Iranian gamers converged into "connections between online and offline," manifesting as humor despite harsh government crackdowns and Internet censorship during protests (Akhavan 2013: 2).[16]

[15] Affective lifeworlds refer to the emotional and experiential dimensions of the lifeworld, which is the world as perceived and lived by individuals. In phenomenology, particularly within the context of affect theory, this concept emphasizes how emotions shape and are shaped by individuals' experiences in their everyday lives. Affective lifeworlds examine the interrelationship between personal feelings and the social environment, highlighting how emotions shape perceptions, interactions, and one's understanding of existence within a social context. As a qualitative research method, phenomenology focuses on studying these lived experiences, aiming to uncover the meanings individuals attribute to their emotional states and how these states manifest in their lifeworlds. My understanding of affective lifeworlds is rooted in Edmund Husserl's conceptualization of lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), who sought to describe the essences of experiences, including emotional ones, as they appear in consciousness.

[16] Resilient lifeworlds complement affective lifeworlds by emphasizing the capacity to sustain meaning and identity in the face of emotional challenges. While affective lifeworlds capture the emotional textures of everyday life, resilient lifeworlds focus on the systems and resources that help individuals adapt, recover, and transform their experiences when confronted by adversity. In other words, resilient lifeworlds emphasize an adaptive capacity to form networks, whether informal or formal, and even for strategic purposes to enact systemic change or unintentional community-building that emerges through shared experiences of navigating systemic constraints. These networks, whether deliberately formed for resistance or naturally emerging through shared digital spaces and

In 2010, Gladwell wrote "Small Change" for *The New Yorker*. He made an interesting point that you need more than tweets and posts to make real change happen. While social media can get people fired up at first, the movements that last are built on solid ground – they have unions, political parties, and other groups working together. I agree. You need both resources and strong networks to keep the resistance going against state power. The purpose of digital tools alone is insufficient for sustained resistance, and strong organizational ties are essential for the success of social movements. My dissertation, therefore, illustrates how reformist networks and resources in Iran continue to play a crucial role in maintaining organized resistance from the 2009 uprising in Iran to the Woman Life Freedom Movement of 2022.

Thirdly, combining the concept of digital authoritarianism with concepts like quiet encroachment and soft war may illuminate the contrasting agendas between government-imposed controls and Iranian aspirations for fundamental Internet rights. My research thus intervenes in the literature of Iran's centralized system for censorship by exposing threats to VPNs and other censorship-evasion tools (Bock et al. 2020). I offer additional insights into how Iranian authorities legitimize their extensive control over information and communication technologies to stifle democratic discourse (Shirazi 2014: 235). Despite stringent measures—with VPNs recently declared illegal under the "Bill of Cyberspace Protection" —ordinary citizens continue to leverage these tools to sustain critical connectivity. Therefore, my work expands on previous studies of citizen censorship countermeasures (Rahimi 2015; Alimardani & Milan 2017) by incorporating a broader perspective from the digital repression scholarship. Alexei Abrahams' study on cybersecurity insecurities and inequality spans the MENA region

practices, demonstrate how communities adapt and sustain themselves even under restrictive conditions. The resilience manifests not just in organized movements but in the everyday ways people connect, support each other, and maintain their cultural and social bonds despite attempts at digital control and surveillance.

and shows that states like Iran and Israel have a “complex chain” of power leading to states' actions and consequently entangling social media networks with citizens’ perceptions and political actions (2021: 53). Marwa Fatafta’s study on digital repression in the MENA region illuminates how governments bypass diplomatic constraints through intelligence-sharing agreements, revealing the transnational nature of digital surveillance and control (2021:41). Beyond these contributions, my research also examines how gamers create technological fluidity as a counterforce to macro-social policies like those imposed by the IRI.

At the same time, I consider other scholarly works that focus on digital authoritarianism outside of the MENA region. Xiao Qiang’s (2021) analysis of digital authoritarianism in China provides my study with a comparative framework for understanding how state-controlled digital environments can be engineered to maintain power through examples like the “Skynet Project” and government agencies like China’s National Development and Reform Commission. Qiang informs my work by and large because it shows China’s sophisticated infrastructure of control and how different authoritarian states develop similar yet contextually specific digital control mechanisms. Fabian Burkhardt and Mariëlle Wijermars argue that “authoritarian states’ dependence on foreign digital technologies and services can shape and constrain their capacity to control, surveil, and repress domestically” (2022: 2). Like Jones (2022), Burkhardt and Wijermars’ work may explain why Iranian gamers can find spaces for resistance through foreign gaming platforms with workarounds.

In addition to investigating digital authoritarian spaces and regimes, I explore scholarly perspectives on the alternative right. Far-right groups on any digital platform have figured out how to use technology to their advantage. They organize, spread their ideas, and get their messages out there (Marwick et al. 2022; Kakavand 2023; Junman 2024). The problem is that

these tools often amplify divisive messages, leaving little room for inclusive debate. Therefore, both bodies of literature agree that technological innovation is a double-edged sword. Digital tools are a double-edged sword. They can give voice to people who have been silenced, but they are also perfect for spreading extreme ideas and weaponizing information (Valentini et al. 2020).

My work on Iranian gamers shows that there is no simple answer about technology's role in the Middle East. These tools can help people resist power, but governments also use them to watch and control their citizens. My research shows that one can look at technology and understand history, politics, and how people organize on the ground. When comparing my findings with other research, it becomes clear how messy and complicated the digital age is.

2. *Game Studies and the Middle East*

Game studies, also known as ludology, is a robust field comprising studies on cultural, historical, and social aspects of games and gaming. Most studies focus on games made by, or gamers in, the United States (Boellstorff 2006; Boellstorff 2008; Nardi 2010; Condis 2018) and China (Lindtner et al. 2008; Nardi 2010; Szablewicz 2020; Gu et al. 2024; Patterson & Fickle 2024). The academic research that focuses on video games in the Middle East usually focuses on the Arab world, from a translation and localization of games for PCs (Al-Batineh 2021; Al-Batineh & Alawneh 2021; Al-Batineh & Alawneh 2022; Jarrah et al. 2023; Ibrahim & Hassan 2024) to video game developmental and cultural perspectives (Courmont & Clément 2014; Kasmiya 2015; Šisler et al. 2023). And, even so, there is an article on localizing mobile games (Sayaheen 2024). Other scholars have focused on the representation of Islam and the potential flattening of culture through an orientalist lens (Höglund 2008; Šisler 2008 2023; Mukherjee 2016; Al-Rawi 2024), while others have conducted some cultural analysis of games in Turkey

(Yılmaz & Çağıltay 2005; Tuker et al. 2015). I have contributed to the scholarship on the Iranian game industry and culture (Ahmadi 2015; Šisler et al. 2017; Šisler & Mohseni 2017; Shahnahpur 2021; Cohoon 2021; Cohoon 2022), whereas others focus on localization (Khoshsaligheh & Ameri 2020; Afzali & Zahiri 2021; Daiiani & Keogh 2022).

My dissertation contributes to the above body of literature by diving more deeply into gaming culture and video games as cultural artifacts. However, video games are objects of peripheral interest to my study. I am among the few who have specifically focused on gamers in Iran. However, others who have written about Iranian gamers have concentrated on analyzing gamers' comments online (Afzali & Zahiri 2021) and the relationship between video games and some interviews of gamers' engagement in virtual worlds (Šisler 2018). Kamiab Ghorbanpour focuses on the state-funded game industry and the obstacles Iranian developers face in achieving international success (2022: 3). Bushra Alfaraj (2016) also focuses on ethnography of Arab gamers in the Middle East. Ghorbanpour's and Alfaraj's work are master's theses. Other sources on Iranian gaming culture are from the news media.[17] Several articles produced in Iran focus on mental health and gaming but are, at best, tangentially related to this study (Hamzehzadeh et al. 2022; Rafiemanesh et al. 2023). My research is likely the first dissertation that fully engages as an ethnography of Iranian gamers and one of the few ethnographies of gamers in the MENA region. Because of this lack of MENA studies scholarship contribution to ethnographic game studies, I rely on ethnographies in game studies and digital ethnography outside the MENA region to shape the research.

[17] Motamedi, M. (2019). Of course Iran has 'girl gamers', but they face unique barriers. AlJazeera. https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2019/9/2/of-course-iran-has-girl-gamers-but-they-face-unique-barriers. "'We just want to play': Iran gamers battle reality of US sanctions." (2021). France 24. https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210217-we-just-want-to-play-iran-gamers-battle-reality-of-us-sanctions.

While I explore the intersection of digital media, sociocultural and political dynamics, and governmental policies in Iran, Iranian gamer experiences are the main throughline. Gaming communities in Iran are vital to youth and young adults because they provide a space of belonging, which can be especially limited in social media and public spaces. Digital media spaces have emerged as an area of study to understand the everyday lives of Iranian gamers. Yet, scholars focusing on the intersection of digital media and gamers mainly provide anthropological investigations into the global north perspective. My dissertation adds to the digital and gaming ethnographies literature because it emphasizes what makes Iranian gamer experiences unique to the United States or elsewhere. My study shows the formation of underground close-knit communities that are highly private and form a resistance and escape from socio-political pressures. In contrast, gaming communities in non-authoritarian contexts are unrestricted and much more open to others.

Virtual worlds share conventions that enhance player experiences and support the formation of virtual communities across the globe (Pearce 2009; Taylor 2022). Core conventions include spatiality, contiguity, exploration, persistence, embodied persistent identities, inhabitability, consequential participation, populousness, and worldness (Pearce 2008; Pearce 2009). Therefore, spatial literacy and discursive practices are crucial for navigating virtual worlds for gamers, especially *WoW* (Pearce 2008:18). The dissertation's regional focus enriches the global understanding of virtual communities by incorporating perspectives from the Middle East, a region often overlooked in ethnographies of gaming. In part, Iranians have a hyper knowledge of space in virtual worlds that must be combined with virtual private networks

(VPNs)[18] and other circumvention tools[19] to afford any virtual world inhabitability. Pearce argues that emergent behavior in virtual worlds arises from the interaction between players and the affordances of the play space (2009:24). I agree that gaming spaces afford new ways to interact. However, virtual world ecosystems are "built" differently for Iranians, mainly through hurdles like high latency[20] and VPNs.

T. L. Taylor argues that ethnography is kindred to play. Play, therefore, mirrors the relationship between ethnographic practices and the practices of the game in digital gaming environments (2022:33). Her research includes revisiting fieldnotes on massively multiplayer online games and high-level raiding, noting similarities between the research process and playing a game. While Taylor looked at how gamers build communities and culture in online games, I wanted to see if those patterns appeared in different cultural contexts. My research builds on hers but takes it in a new direction by providing comparative insights and new analysis on gaming practices and social dynamics in Iran.

Other scholars use ethnographic approaches to study play. Bonnie Nardi's ethnographic research on *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) provides a comprehensive understanding of the game's player behavior, social dynamics, and cultural practices. Nardi (2010) touches on John Dewey's theory of play while providing insights into gamer experiences, from video game mechanics to modding and participatory design. Nardi's work even consists of a month of field research in

[18] VPNs protect users by encrypting their IP addresses (the unique identifying number assigned to every device connected to the Internet). Through this encryption process, a user can access the Internet and appear to be in a different location.

[19] Besides VPNs, technically sophisticated gamers may use alternate DNS servers or tunneling network traffic to proxies to access the Internet fully. Some may scramble network traffic to make it harder for the government to surveil and censor.

[20] Latency is the time data travels from one place to another on a computer network. When latency is high, there is a delay or what gamers call lag. High latency can make the game unplayable.

China. I add to this research because I also focus on *WoW* gaming behavior, but I use the lens of digital authoritarianism when thinking about gaming spaces in Iran.

Rachael Root's (2023) research on the accumulation and containment of wealth in *WoW* uses archaeological perspectives and theories to analyze player interactions and behaviors in the game. Her work addresses the integration of digital technologies in daily life, unexplored cultures in online games, the concept of "worldness,"[21] gaps in video game research, application of archaeological frameworks, ethnographic research in *WoW*, containment in *WoW*, phenomenological frameworks and the ontological turn, economic impacts of video games, digital assets, and economies, the racialization of labor in *WoW*, corporate ideology in *WoW*, repetition in gameplay, non-fiscal wealth in video games, methodological approaches, participant observation and data collection, analysis of PvP interactions, aggrandizers in *WoW*, containment and transformation, sociotechnical systems, theoretical tensions, and resolutions, activity theory and sociotechnical systems, phenomenological experiences and knowledge, and the digital ontological approach. Nicole Naar (2020) examines decision-making and behavior in controlled environments using experimental economic games (EEGs). However, there are concerns about the external validity of EEG results, including generalizability and parallelism. The theoretical and methodological implications of these concerns are essential for anthropologists to consider.

Many scholars have also addressed misogyny in gaming culture. While not the main focus of this dissertation, I look to Losh's (2016) analysis of Gamergate, a controversy that exposed the fragility of the "magic circle" concept in gaming. Traditionally, this concept framed gaming spaces as separate, safe environments insulated from real-world social and political issues. Losh critiques this notion, arguing that Gamergate revealed how gaming spaces are

[21] The concept of worldness involves narrative, behavior, and locations within a virtual world (Pearce 2009; Root 2023).

deeply intertwined with broader societal dynamics, including misogyny, harassment, and toxic masculinity. She highlights how the rhetoric of "ethics in gaming journalism" was weaponized to justify harassment campaigns targeting women, feminists, and marginalized groups. Butt adds to this discussion by showing that women continue to play videogames despite experiencing hostile misogyny and violence (2022: 91). Several scholars emphasize patriarchal models in society spill into gaming spaces that reinforce male dominance and minimize female participation (Silva et al. 2023; Butt 2022; Paaßen, B. et al. 2017). I contribute to this conversation by examining how Iranian female gamers navigate multiple layers of exclusion - both as women in male-dominated spaces and as Iranians facing geopolitical restrictions. Their experiences reveal how seemingly neutral technical barriers, like sanctions blocking access to *WoW* servers, compound existing gender-based discrimination. Through ethnographic analysis of players like Mariam, who consciously choose visibility despite harassment, I demonstrate how daily gaming activities become acts of resistance against intersecting forms of marginalization.

3. *Affective Entanglements and Lifeworlds*

I also contribute to the scholarship focusing on affect theory (Berlant 2011; Leys 2017; Osanloo 2021). My dissertation adds to affect theory by examining how emotional and social experiences—or what I term as "affective entanglements"—shape responses to digital authoritarianism. It builds on established concepts (i.e., those found in Berlant's work) by framing affect as intensities of emotion arising from socio-material and discursive realities. In essence, affect theory here is used to understand how emotional energy and affective experiences drive resistance, influence behaviors, and reframe the relationship between citizens and digital infrastructures under conditions of state control. It is conceptualized as the intensities of emotion

generated by the interrelationship between material conditions and the ways in which these conditions are communicated, interpreted, and represented. I am therefore situating affect not as an isolated internal state but as intrinsically bound to the socio-material environment (including material inequalities, digital architectures, and physical infrastructures) and the discursive practices (language, narrative, and cultural codes) that shape how experiences are understood and lived. As such, this dissertation adds to affect theory–intensities of emotion due to socio-material-discursive reality—by framing how gamers face moments of distress and experience impulses to exert soft power so that they may bypass Internet censorship and, therefore, play games (Barad 2007).

I explore Iranians' embodied precarity due to material inequality created by affective entanglements, from US government sanctions to local laws, leading to new types of lifeworld assemblages fostered by their fantasy of having a normal life (Berlant 2011). Anna Tsing's (2005) concept of friction illuminates how these digital encounters generate productive tension, where global gaming cultures meet local forms of tactical resistance. This friction manifests in the creative ways Iranian gamers transform restrictive technologies into tools for connection, producing what Tsing calls "sticky engagements" between global digital cultures and local practices of survival (2005: 6). Through these friction-laden encounters, Iranian gamers develop hybrid forms of resistance that emerge precisely from the awkward, unstable, and creative interconnections between global gaming communities and local material constraints. These moments of friction—where international payment restrictions meet informal economies, where global gaming platforms encounter local censorship, and where worldwide gaming communities intersect with tactical resistance—become sites of cultural and social innovation rather than mere limitations.

Digital encounters emerge as complex, multimodal events deeply enmeshed in broader sociocultural narratives. Drawing on theorists such as Barad (2007) and Berlant (2011), I recognize that these experiences are continually shaped by the entanglements of diverse actors, contexts, and temporal moments. I foreground the competencies of individuals, particularly those living under digital authoritarianism, in navigating and reconfiguring imposed constraints. By examining digital environments through the lens of affect theory, I illuminate how the participants demonstrate unique proficiency in navigating these challenges, thereby going beyond dominant socio-affective practices and contributing to more inclusive understandings of others outside of Western contexts. In other words, the intersection of affect theory with digital spaces reveals complex entanglements that shape the experiences of Iranian gamers navigating censorship and seeking a normal life. This analysis builds upon Lauren Berlant's (2011) conceptualization of affect as both emotional states and intensities that emerge from socio-material-discursive realities. These intensities manifest mainly in moments where Iranian gamers encounter and resist Internet censorship, creating what Karen Barad (2007) describes as intra-actions between human agency and material constraints. The concept of affective entanglement, as developed by Ruth Leys' (2017) and Barad's (2007) work, helps us understand how multiple, interconnected forces shape Iranian gamers' experiences. These entanglements unfold across online gaming and in different registers. Participants feel the immediate frustration of navigating blocked content to the more profound affective significance of forging connections within global gaming communities under the shadow of local constraints. Nakamura's (2015) work on racism, sexism, and gaming's cruel optimism extends this discussion by critically examining how racial and gendered biases are woven into the fabric of gaming culture. Her analysis exposes how the promise of digital spaces as liberating and inclusive is often undermined by persistent, systemic

forms of discrimination that mirror broader societal power structures. By engaging with Nakamura's insights, this analysis further illuminates how affective entanglements not only reflect the multifaceted experiences of Iranian gamers but also reveal a deeper layer of intersectional marginalization. Her work also shows that the digital realm, far from being an autonomous escape, is inherently implicated in the reproduction of racism, sexism, and other forms of structural inequality.

The articles by Kathleen Stewart (2011) and Sareeta Amrute (2019) explore the concept of attunements as a framework for understanding human interactions with sociotechnical systems and environments. Stewart's work delves into atmospheric attunements, emphasizing the sensory and affective dimensions of living through everyday materialities and rhythms, while highlighting the generative and transformative potential of attunements in shaping worlds. Amrute extends this concept into the realm of techno-ethics and techno-affects, examining how digital labor and algorithmic systems intersect with histories of race, gender, and class. She critiques top-down ethical frameworks like the Ethical OS and advocates for relational, affective approaches to ethics that center marginalized bodies and their lived experiences. I use both works to understand complex sociotechnical landscapes.

Meanwhile, Arzoo Osanloo's (2021) work on affect in Iranian contexts illuminates how these entanglements create spaces of both constraint and possibility, where individuals navigate between state control and personal agency. These spaces of constraint and possibility that Osanloo identifies manifest as assemblages in the digital realm, where, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari theorize (1980), Iranian gamers forge new connections and modes of being despite restrictive conditions. Deleuze's and Guattari's framework of assemblages provides a crucial theoretical lens for understanding how Iranian gamers create new forms of digital existence.

These assemblages emerge as complex arrangements of human desires, technological capabilities, regulatory frameworks, and social practices. Within these assemblages, gamers develop "networked lifeworlds" – spaces where the technical and social aspects of gaming intersect with broader cultural and political realities (Reed 2024: 233). Katherine Hayles' (2017) work on cognitive assemblages enriches this understanding by highlighting how digital technologies become integrated into human consciousness. Furthermore, the concept of cognitive assemblages helps understand the decision-making processes of gamers because these assemblages consist of technical and human agents, non-consciously creating habits through online access algorithms. This interdependence goes beyond gaming and, therefore, has a set of emergent behaviors across the Iranian population, like automatic decision-making through bypassing censorship as an interplay of human creativity, shared knowledge, and technological tools.

The material inequality created by US sanctions adds another layer to these affective entanglements. Although the US targets state actors through sanctions, these measures inadvertently weaken Iranian society by limiting economic resources, technological access, and international payment systems for game purchases. In tandem with local laws and cultural norms, this material reality produces what Barad (2007) terms "material-discursive phenomena," where physical constraints and social meanings are inextricably linked. In this context, Iranian gamers' efforts to bypass censorship are best understood as tactical resistance—a series of everyday maneuvers that challenge state control without direct confrontation. Reflecting Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "lines of flight," these creative escapes offer practical, though inherently entangled, ways to navigate oppressive systems (1980: 9). Together, these theoretical strands shed light on forming new lifeworld assemblages characterized by hybridity: the fusion of local

and global gaming cultures, grey-market technical solutions, and various social and cultural capital forms. The fantasy of a normal life, as discussed by Berlant (2011), emerges as a driving force within these assemblages, motivating gamers to traverse complex technical and legal landscapes while sustaining connections to broader digital communities.

The contribution to affect theory here lies in understanding how these various elements – technical, social, legal, and emotional – create what might be termed "digital affect assemblages." These assemblages represent more than just technical solutions to censorship; they embody complex emotional and social strategies for maintaining connection and normalcy in constrained circumstances. This framework helps us understand how affects circulate through social networks and how the technical infrastructure enables and constrains digital life. Iranian gamers' experiences contribute to affect theory by demonstrating how emotional intensities emerge from and respond to specific socio-technical configurations. Their navigation of censorship and creation of alternative gaming spaces represents more than just technical ingenuity, embodying "agential realism" – the inseparability of material conditions and human agency in creating new forms of digital existence (Barad 2007: 151).

I also combine Michael Jackson's concept of lifeworlds and Alexander Golub's concept of sociotechnical systems. Jackson's idea of intersubjectivity as the "subjective in-between" emphasizes how trust and shared understanding emerge through interaction, while his notion of lifeworlds as "a force field (kraftfeld)" underscores the fluid and contested nature of social norms and boundaries (2013: 24). Affective lifeworlds emerge as dynamic force fields where emotional intensities and shared experiences shape collective meaning and action. These lifeworlds are not static containers but fluid spaces of possibility where affects circulate, accumulate, and transform through everyday interactions. Within these force fields, emotions are not merely individual

psychological states but active forces that move between bodies, technologies, and social spaces, creating shared atmospheres of experience. The kraftfeld nature of affective lifeworlds means they are constantly in flux—shaped by the push and pull of emotional energies, collective memories, and shared aspirations. For Iranian gamers, these affective lifeworlds manifest in the immediate emotional responses to digital constraints, the shared frustrations of navigating censorship, and the collective joy of successful resistance. These emotional intensities create a force field that binds communities together, generating collective resilience through shared emotional experiences. The affective dimension of these lifeworlds is particularly evident in moments of collective action, where emotional resonance drives community members to support each other, share resources, and maintain connections despite digital barriers.

I then integrate socio-technical systems into the model of Discord information behavior, which enables trust-building, secure communication, and information sharing, illustrating how communities adapt to surveillance through anonymized identities, encryption, and multi-layered trust systems. I emphasize sociotechnical systems to show that gaming communities experience a digital world's "realness" that affords trust and loyalty. Golub's sociotechnical framing is also helpful because of the emphasis on modifications and tools in *WoW*, which parallels how Discord facilitates trust management and information flow across boundaries. These systems extend beyond digital spaces, influencing real-world interactions, and reflect the importance of project-oriented, multi-sited approaches to understanding virtual worlds. Sociotechnical systems, according to Golub's analysis, are the integrated social and technical elements that enable "coordination and knowledge sharing" within gaming communities, such as Discord's platform features and community-developed verification processes (2010: 35-38). Through ideas,

passions, and moral norms within a community, Iranian gamers create and maintain digital spaces of interaction (Jackson 2013: 23).

C. Methodology & Design

My inquiry into the lives of Iranian gamers necessitated ethnographic research. Since ethnography was the primary data source, I had to immerse myself in virtual worlds. Even though I primarily relied on information from digital spaces, I already had strong connections within gamer communities; after all, I had played *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) since 2004 and grew up with consoles like Sega Genesis and Super Nintendo. I have also been a part of the main raiding roster in an elite *WoW* guild, giving me additional in-depth knowledge of competitive gaming. My background was vital to the research methods and design because I navigated more readily from outsider to insider status with Iranian gamers, especially if we had mutual connections. In addition to my background, I was adaptable to participants' needs, i.e., gamers' daily routines and disruptions. I also was teachable by participants if I misunderstood anything that I observed.

I spent 2020 to 2024 conducting this research, which was made possible with my admittance into an elite guild in 2016. In 2016, I played *WoW* with Farid,[22] who inhabits this dissertation as part of Chapter 5's main storyline. I had learned that Farid was Iranian when discussing that I was an MA student in Middle East Studies at the UW. During that time, I became acquainted with the rest of the guild, whom I indirectly knew for 12 years. While they consisted of an ethnically diverse group nearing a population of over 40 people (mostly male, except for two others and me), I noted Farid's perspectives, especially moments where I saw

[22] All participant names are pseudonyms.

Pepe the Frog in a Keffiyeh. On one occasion, seeing Pepe explode with a bomb did not faze Farid, more than likely because he and others in the guild grew up using platforms like Reddit and 4Chan. So, this would not be surprising for those who see subversive material regularly on the Internet.[23]

As I connected with a few more Iranian gamers online through mutual friends in Seattle, I realized that these early relationships helped me expand my network through intentional outreach and snowball sampling. While I used snowball sampling, most of the recruitment happened naturally across different Discord servers, where I joined as both a researcher and a fellow gamer, making it easier for me to build trust. Discord servers thus emerged as a crucial research platform, functioning as digital meeting grounds where trust could be established gradually.[24] The Iranian participants came from varied locations. This included the Iranian diaspora and within Iran itself. About a third of them (10 individuals) were based in North America, whom I met through mutual friends and gaming networks. Many gamers were located in Tehran, with a smaller group in Shiraz. A wide range of locations allowed me to experience different understandings of Internet access, VPN use, and community size. Initial invitations to these servers often came through existing participants, who would vouch for my presence and research intentions. This would lead to digital introductions and sometimes to one-on-one conversations where potential participants could ask questions about the research and decide on their level of involvement. Although somewhat effective over time, the snowball sampling method was not nearly as important as knowing someone who could introduce me to their gaming networks,

[23] *WoW* guilds that I have come across, especially male-dominated ones, have a channel called Not Safe For Work (NSFW). Susanna Paasonen touches on this topic in her article "Time to celebrate the most disgusting video online" (2017) via social media's market for so-called off-beat, yet very much vitriolic humor. She takes this further in her multiauthor work *#NSFW: Sex, Humor, and Risk in Social Media* with Kylie Jarrett, and Ben Light (2021). Others have focused on Discord servers with a designated chat channel as the main theme (Heslep & Berge 2021; Seering et al. 2024).

[24] See Appendix A on Discord gatekeeping mechanisms to entry.

thereby creating chains of trust that extended across different gaming communities. The distribution between Tehran- and Shiraz-based participants offered valuable comparative perspectives on how urban location within Iran influences gaming experiences. Tehran-based gamers often had access to more stable Internet connections and larger local gaming communities. At the same time, Shiraz-based participants provided insights into gaming cultures outside the capital, highlighting regional variations in digital infrastructure and community organization.

This dissertation thus employs a multi-sited ethnographic approach combining digital and traditional ethnographic methods to examine the intersection of gaming communities, digital resistance, and state control in Iran. The research design is informed by contemporary digital ethnography frameworks (Pink et al. 2016) and critical Internet studies methodologies (Rogers 2019) while maintaining the narrative-style writing of anthropology. I interviewed approximately 30 Iranian and Iranian diaspora gamers in Persian, observed participants across multiple online platforms, and collected data such as memes. I have translated all Persian in this dissertation. The data collection methods include semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and digital artifact collection. Below are my methodological framework, data collection, and analysis methods:

1. Digital ethnography

Digital ethnography is the cornerstone of this research because it enabled an in-depth exploration of online Iranian gaming communities and their interactions. Based on Pink et al.'s (2016) framework, this methodology captures the dynamic and fluid nature of digital spaces where gamers navigate censorship and resistance. By immersing myself in online platforms such

as Discord, Twitch, and Telegram, I observed how Iranian gamers communicate, share strategies, and build communities despite state-imposed restrictions. This approach also allowed me to document the affective dimensions of their interactions, such as expressions of frustration, solidarity, and hope through the lens of the digital lifeworlds.

2. Semi-structured interviews

I conducted semi-structured interviews with approximately 30 Iranian and Iranian diaspora gamers. During the initial interviews, I discussed misrepresentation and propaganda in video game media with gamers to foreground their experiences in Iran and other basic demographic questions. During the second round of initial interviews, we talked more in-depth about their engagement with video game content and the types of games they liked to play online, eventually leading to dynamic questions based on our conversation. This allowed my participants to open up about social precarity, Internet access, and motivations and methods to circumvent surveillance and censorship. While semi-structured interviews were a method to gather initial data, I used less structured methods once I was allowed into circles with gamers. My reasoning for this choice is due, by and large, to the fact that gaming has an ephemeral quality and a more informal flow to how gamers function in a gaming environment. In other words, I benefit, and so do my participants, from a less formally structured interview process, allowing new questions and conversations to arise. I conducted the interviews primarily in Persian and used the initial interviews to gather data on gaming habits and demographic information. Some Iranian Americans and Iranian Canadians preferred to converse in English.

For the gamers who wanted to continue in the dissertation study for the long term, we delved into topics such as social precarity, Internet access, and motivations for circumventing censorship. After the first two sets of interviews, I used more open-ended questions and natural

conversation, encouraging participants to share personal narratives and revealing the complexities of their digital lives. For instance, one participant described how using a VPN to access gaming platforms felt like "crossing a border" and beyond mere nuisance, which shows the emotional and psychological toll of navigating restricted digital spaces. The dissertation makes up the major narrative threads across the interviews, shedding light on the role of gaming as a form of resistance that impacts gamers' socio-political realities.

3. Participant Observation

Participant observation complemented the interviews by providing a contextual understanding of the gaming culture in Iran. In other words, I did not just talk to gamers but also played alongside them. By jumping into their online sessions and watching their Twitch streams, I saw how gamers deal with censorship and stay connected when the Internet gets shaky. Something stood out during these sessions: Women gamers experienced more challenges. They could not just walk into gaming cafes like the guys could, and they had to endure much judgment for being gamers in the first place. Playing and watching other gamers also informed the research goal of capturing day-to-day life and potential hurdles to play in ways that interviews alone never could.

4. Digital artifact collection

I also collected digital artifacts, including memes, screenshots, and chat logs, which captured Iranian gaming communities' cultural and affective dimensions. These artifacts were tangible evidence of the creative ways gamers resist censorship and express their identities. For example, memes mocking Internet restrictions or political leaders reflect gamers' frustrations and form digital resistance, fostering a sense of community and solidarity. Analyzing these artifacts

provided a deeper understanding of digital resistance's symbolic and affective aspects, complementing the insights gained from interviews and observations. To ensure the ethical integrity of this research, I employed pseudonyms and anonymization techniques to protect the identities of my participants. This included combining similar narratives and using random pseudonyms to prevent identification. To ensure the ethical integrity of this research, pseudonyms and anonymization techniques were employed to protect participant identities. Data collection from public online platforms was conducted through Web API, ensuring a systematic and ethical approach safeguarding privacy and data reliability.

5. Data Analysis

A dedicated segment of this study focuses on the coding process. The analysis followed a grounded theory approach, allowing theoretical insights to emerge from systematic coding of ethnographic data (Charmaz 2014). Initial coding began with line-by-line analysis of interview transcripts, field notes, and digital artifacts, identifying key concepts around digital resistance, community formation, and affective experiences. These first-cycle codes captured specific practices like VPN usage, emotional responses to censorship, and instances of collective support.

I also looked at Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework while using systematic thematic coding. The process began with open coding of interview transcripts, field notes, and digital artifacts to identify recurring patterns related to digital restriction, tactical resistance, and community formation. Specific codes captured the immediate emotional responses to censorship, tactical strategies for bypassing restrictions, and narratives of embodied precarity. These codes were then grouped into broader analytical categories that revealed key dimensions of gamers' lived experiences. In alignment with Wetherell's (2012) approach to affective-discursive

analysis, special attention was given to tracing emotional intensities and bodily responses within the data. These initial concepts were refined through focused coding into analytical categories that revealed patterns in how Iranian gamers navigate digital restrictions. For example, codes around technical workarounds and community knowledge sharing were grouped to illuminate tactical resistance practices.

Ultimately, following constructivist grounded theory methods (Charmaz 2014), I wrote analytical memos throughout the coding process to track emerging theoretical connections and ensure findings remained grounded in participants' lived experiences. Analytical memos were thus maintained throughout the process to document and refine emerging themes, ensuring that the findings remained closely connected to participant data. The coding process paid particular attention to affect, examining how emotions circulated through digital spaces and manifested in both explicit statements and implicit resonances within the data. This approach combined systematic coding with attention to affective dimensions, allowing me to trace how individual experiences of digital precarity connected to broader patterns of collective resistance and community formation. Constant comparative analysis between codes, memos, and raw data helped refine theoretical categories while maintaining their connection to participants' narratives. This iterative process revealed how tactical resistance emerges through everyday digital practices, leading to theoretical insights about the relationship between material constraints, affective experiences, and collective action in Iranian gaming communities. To ensure analytical rigor, I regularly returned to raw data to verify emerging patterns and consulted with participants about preliminary findings. This grounded theory approach enabled me to develop theoretical frameworks that remained deeply rooted in participants' lived experiences while contributing to broader discussions of digital resistance and community formation in contexts of restriction.

D. Chapter Breakdown

The dissertation comprises six chapters divided into two sections, portions of which are based on material previously published *in Interdisciplinary Digital Engagement in Arts & Humanities*, available under a Creative Commons license (Cohoon, 2021, 2022). In Section 1 – Politics of the Everyday and Iranian Resistance, I reveal how the everyday entangled politics exacerbate gamers' experiences as they fear Internet blocking, shutdown, and violent suppressive measures by state actors. In doing so, I examined sources using discourse analysis, including but not limited to video game content and chat forums on Steam and Blizzard, in addition to Persian language publications, to understand digital media propaganda, Internet laws in Iran, and the "Bill for Protection of Cyberspace Users" that made its way to parliament in September 2022.[25]

Chapter 1 focuses on how old media censorship (i.e., telegram to newspapers) has extended to cyberspace, impacting the online public sphere in the IRI. This chapter re-examines the historical trajectory of state-controlled media as it transitions into the digital era. The argument anchors itself in the idea that censorship and public control mechanisms are not entirely new; rather, they have evolved and adapted to emerging technologies. The state's approach to surveillance, messaging, and digital repression has drawn on age-old strategies yet reconfigured them to exert influence within cyberspace. This chapter problematizes the notion of digital naivety by carefully delineating past practices and new technologies. Instead, it argues

[25] The Protection Bill has been circulating in the parliament since 2021. In July 2021, the parliament voted to allow the Bill to proceed under Article 85 of the Iranian Constitution, permitting it to be debated in secrecy by a specially designated commission. However, digital rights advocates in Iran have raised serious concerns about the bill's impact on Internet freedom and privacy, sparking substantial public outcry, effectively forcing lawmakers to abandon the legislative efforts. Seyed Nizamuddin Mousavi, the spokesperson for the Parliamentary Presidency, said on February 7, 2023, that the Protection Bill had been removed from the parliamentary agenda. See footnote 54 for more information on Article 85.

that the state's intervention in the digital arena constitutes a continuity of historical efforts to control narratives, reshape public opinion, and reinforce power structures.

The analysis also explores key theoretical underpinnings, drawing broadly on Foucault's (1977) ideas of surveillance and discipline and applying them to the modern context of Internet regulation. However, my main throughline for the chapter is digital authoritarianism, in which rhetoric, notions of national identity, and security issues justify extensive monitoring and censorship. While historical, the interweaving of ethnographic narratives provides a nuanced perspective when situating the lived experience of others with current digital restrictions on a continuum of control, suggesting that the digital revolution has not entirely upended established power relations but has rather provided new tools for their reinforcement.

Chapter 2 looks at the legislative process that has sparked fear in the potential passing of the "Bill for Protection of Cyberspace Users." Here, the legal framework is examined not merely as a set of restrictions but as a tool or method of soft war that impacts the socio-political reality of citizens in Iran. My analysis of Iranian government tactics across several agencies shows how the law intersects with the lived experiences of the populace, particularly during critical moments of protest and resistance, such as the Woman Life Freedom Movement in 2022. The chapter argues that the introduction of the Internet Bill was not solely an administrative act, but a highly politicized measure intended to curb dissent and control public discourse.

Through interviews and discourse analysis, the chapter reveals that the bill acts as both a symbolic and practical instrument of repression. It outlines how the law has led to an environment where everyday acts of digital participation become fraught with risk. Participants in the study likened navigating this legal framework to traversing a minefield, where any misstep could result in severe consequences. This heightened sense of precariousness amplifies societal

anxieties and engenders a collective consciousness about digital rights and freedoms. The chapter further illustrates that while the bill ostensibly aims to protect cyberspace users, it simultaneously stifles freedom of speech and limits the ability of citizens to mobilize online, thereby undermining the democratic potential of digital media.

Chapter 3 dives into soft war and digital resistance, disinformation such as fake links to Starlink Internet, and the weaponization of sophisticated technologies to target VPNs, consequently impacting the health of the Internet network and slowing down Internet speeds. Despite bandwidth issues, I argue that through memeification of the state by ordinary citizens, Iranian gamers defy state actions and produce humor-based political discourses, a coping mechanism that challenges state authority and power. In a striking departure from traditional forms of resistance, this chapter thus examines how humor and the creation of memes have become potent tools for subverting state narratives. The chapter elucidates the emergent phenomenon where digital humor is a way to cope and a form of active political dissent. By repurposing state imagery and rhetoric into satirical memes, Iranian citizens, especially gamers, can challenge the dominant discourse from a position of relative safety and anonymity.

Iranian gamers know they are being watched, so they have gotten smart about finding ways to keep things light while making fun of the situation. Their jokes communicated serious messages; these are not just random memes. When a funny image spreads through gaming circles and social media, it often conveys a more profound sentiment. One player told me, “We laugh together, but we all know what we’re really saying.” I have spent time tracking how these memes spread. Sure, they make people laugh, but they do more than that. They chip away at official propaganda, one joke at a time. When thousands of people share and remix these memes,

they are doing something powerful by taking complex political ideas and turning them into something that feels personal, relatable, and impossible to shut down.

The second half of the dissertation takes the narrative from the local context to a global one, providing the affective dimensions for geopolitical issues between the US and Iran, which consequently fed into the crux of the recent Iranian protests. In Chapter 4, I examine the experiences of women gamers, the legacy of economic sanctions, and their overlap with the gaming industry in Iran. Although this chapter scrutinizes the impact of international sanctions on Iran's gaming industry, it delves briefly into misogyny and racism in the gameosphere. Specifically, I seek to address a binary between the complicated nature of female gamer access to playing games, and consequently facing sexism and violence. However, like the majority of the dissertation, I emphasize the critical tensions between Iranian gamers' right to play games and the broader digital infrastructure, game industry, and sanctions that prevents them from doing so. The chapter emphasizes that sanctions, while designed as geopolitical instruments, have far-reaching consequences that permeate everyday life. It presents case studies in which sanctions manifest as technical challenges such as increased latency, limited access to VPNs, and constrained bandwidth, directly affecting online gamers' user experience. The argument unfolds by linking economic impediments with cultural shifts. For instance, the slowdown in Internet speeds does not only hinder gameplay; it also alters the dynamics of online social interactions, diminishing the spontaneity and vibrancy of digital communities. Moreover, the chapter illustrates how combining economic sanctions and state control creates an environment where digital participation is both a challenge and a form of quiet defiance. The narrative draws attention to the resilience of Iranian gamers, who find innovative ways to adapt and sustain their digital engagements despite structural constraints.

In Chapter 5, I emphasize the sociotechnical and socio-political perceptions. I share the narratives of gamers who play *WoW* and *DOTA 2*. These games serve as a microcosm for understanding broader socio-political dynamics, where players navigate the game's virtual landscapes and the real-world constraints imposed by state censorship and economic sanctions. At the same time, I touch on former Designer and Senior Creative Director at Blizzard Entertainment who used his influence to assault women, while discussing a participant's take on the situation. The irony is that the participants' guild engaged in some very suspect, misogynistic behavior unbeknownst to the Iranian-Canadian participant. Although I attend to gender and misogyny to some degree, the chapter's foremost emphasis is how the stakes in these environments are significant and necessitate a successful guild leadership and community building that depend on challenging the status quo and fostering an equitable space for all members despite entrenched biases, mainly when I discuss participant experiences in Iran.

The analysis also explores the gendered dimensions of these lifeworlds, focusing on the experiences of female gamers who face additional challenges, such as societal stigma and toxic masculinity within gaming culture. After spending time with these gamers and hearing their stories, I began to see how they move between their gaming life and real life. They are constantly finding creative ways to express themselves, whether playing games or not. The chapter concludes by situating these experiences within the broader framework of digital resistance, arguing that the sociotechnical assemblages formed in *WoW* exemplify the resilience and adaptability of Iranian gamers in the face of systemic constraints.

In Chapter 6, I explore the gendered tensions in the IRI by interweaving Iranian gamer experiences while integrating memes shared by participants. This chapter shows how the emergence of tipping turbans became a repertoire of contention and a form of resilience against

the state. Throughout this chapter, I examine the emergence of tipping turbans during the Woman Life Freedom movement, which entails knocking off Islamic clerics' turbans. Noting this trend, I saw in several videos and content from my participants how protestors would knock the turbans off randomly in the streets, catalyzing as a resistance method. By analyzing this act of defiance alongside digital artifacts such as memes and social media posts, the chapter argues that tipping turbans represents a repertoire of contention that challenges the gendered and religious authority of the Iranian government. The chapter situates this phenomenon within the broader context of feminist resistance, highlighting how Iranian women gamers and activists use physical and digital spaces to contest state power.

The chapter also explores the affective dimensions of this resistance, focusing on how humor and collective action serve as coping mechanisms and sources of empowerment. By interweaving personal narratives with theoretical insights, the chapter comprehensively analyzes how tipping turbans and related acts of defiance are actions for gender equality and human rights in Iran. The chapter then concludes by reflecting on these actions' implications on digital and physical forms of resistance in authoritarian contexts.

For Appendix A, I provide an explanation of insider-outsiders through gatekeeping mechanisms to join Discord servers. For Appendix B, I share *Digital Iran*, a digital companion to the dissertation that serves as both an analytical tool and a practical resource for understanding Internet censorship in Iran. Developed in collaboration with the Miaan Group, this project provides a comprehensive guide to the various regulatory measures employed by state and non-state actors to control digital spaces. It includes detailed infographics and case studies that illustrate the impact of these measures on at-risk communities, as well as practical strategies for circumventing censorship. By integrating these digital tools, the appendices extend the

dissertation's impact beyond academia, offering valuable insights for activists, policymakers, and researchers working to promote digital rights and freedoms in Iran and similar contexts. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the potential of digital companions to bridge the gap between scholarly research and real-world applications, emphasizing the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to addressing complex socio-political challenges.

Chapter 1

Soft War: A History of New Media Information Controls in the Islamic Republic of Iran

As I sat there watching Babak and Arman through a Discord call as they shared their screen, their voices carried across continually buffering connections, revealing a deeper narrative about life under digital restrictions. "Vay vay, this video game access thing is getting old," Babak sighed, his frustration palpable even through the crackling audio. "Any chatting thing is somehow a protest thing. Sucked not being able to play a few months ago. Why block DOTA 2?" The question hung in the digital air, a testament to what anthropologist James Scott termed "weapons of the weak," the everyday forms of resistance that emerge in contexts of power imbalance. In this instance, humor became a subtle weapon of protest, with Arman noting, "Probably just blocking something major, DOTA 2 may be in the crossfire due to the unrest or maybe specifically targeted. Who knows?" On the surface, our conversation felt like a casual exchange between friends, with one frustrated by an interruption of their game, like when their game crashes or they cannot log in.[26] Woven into Amran's words was a sharp, lived awareness of the broader digital politics shaping their everyday lives. When Babak sarcastically declared, "Brother! We are the biggest threat to the government," he was engaging in performative resistance by using irony to critique power structures while maintaining plausible deniability. I found the timing of their conversation to be significant. It occurred during increased digital restrictions when seemingly apolitical platforms like DOTA 2 had become casualties of broader state control measures.

Looking back, their discussion of these restrictions reflected a particularized digital adaptation, wherein Iranian gamers had learned to navigate, anticipate, and critique state control while maintaining their online communities. What struck me most as I reflected on our late-night conversations was how gaming had become more than just entertainment. It was a window into the everyday practices, or ways of operating, through which people navigate systems of control (de Certeau 1984: xi). Reflecting on how Arman speculated *DOTA 2* being "in the crossfire" of suppression, I now know that gamers must employ a significant level of digital literacy under

[26] Generally, a game crash means a technical glitch that logs a player out of the game or simply freezes the digital world. For an Iranian gamer, this takes on additional nuances. Sometimes, a player in Iran experiences software failure, but sometimes, a game crash can signal state intervention, Internet throttling, or VPN blocks. Players have learned to read these interruptions like a language, distinguishing between ordinary technical hiccups and the telltale signs of surveillance or censorship. What might appear as mere technical failures to outsiders become, for this community, meaningful signals of broader political currents shaping their digital lives.

authoritarianism to navigate state control and the impact on seemingly neutral gaming spaces. I noted that their sarcasm served multiple purposes beyond just a coping mechanism.

This chapter traces the Islamic Republic of Iran's (IRI) information control strategies, focusing on how soft war tactics have been deployed to maintain authoritarian control in the digital age. Soft war is an IRI policy that is consequently directed at Iranian citizens in and outside Iran. While the literature posits that the IRI has been engaged in soft war with the US, I will explain that, despite being a policy to curtail Western influence, its multifaceted aims are primarily targeted toward the Iranian public—serving as propaganda and a supplement to hard war against its own society (Jones 2019; Cohoon 2022). Throughout Chapter 1, I argue that IRI's approach to Internet censorship and control has transformed from basic filtering to a sophisticated system of digital authoritarianism, driven by responses to social movements and perceived threats to state authority.

I do this by covering the early development of Iran's Internet infrastructure and digital culture in the first section titled "Iranian Internet & Blogging." In section 2, "2009 to Present: When Soft War Becomes Hard War," I analyze the escalation of state control over digital. These sections lead into the overall impact of the 2022 Woman Life Freedom protests on digital control measures while also providing a glimpse into the state's escalation toward stymying Internet freedom and enacting control in Iran. Thematically, I rely on the term soft war to explain the state's desire to control information through legal frameworks while also showing its impact on Iranian digital culture and society. In the dissertation, I show how everyday digital and physical interactions serve as sophisticated forms of resistance against Iranian state control. Throughout this chapter, I demonstrate how seemingly mundane moments – a sarcastic comment about Evin Prison and a café conversation about the Blogfather era – reveal complex strategies of survival

and resistance. These are not just casual interactions but calculated deployments of memory, humor, and shared cultural understanding that challenge state power. My research shows how Iranians, both within the country and in the diaspora, transform ordinary spaces into archives of resistance. When Arman sarcastically remarks about prison conditions or when Leila discusses her refusal to return until "real change" happens, they are not merely expressing opinions. Instead, I believe that they are actively preserving and transmitting resistance knowledge through informal channels.

Employing softer alternatives to physical violence provides strategic significance on local and global levels. However, gamers and Internet users do not buy into the soft war that the IRI is selling. As the regime tries to counter perceived threats from the outside world and inside the IRI, the ideological rift between the IRI and its citizens becomes more insurmountable, igniting Iranian Internet memes. To understand the soft war strategy, I elucidate this policy's historical and affective dimensions towards its population on the ground through media broadcasting, semi-governmental "cultural" centers, information controls, and the Internet. Throughout this chapter, I share the views of Iranians who desire the everyday yet experience things like information controls that disrupt such "banal" expectations when compared to those of us who have unmitigated access at our reach on our phones, tablets, laptops, PCs, etc. At the same time, I present a citizen counter-soft war to the IRI's attempts at nation-state control narrative spinning across Iranian cyberspace. To explain this national narrative versus the citizens' narrative, I share the perspectives of Leila, Arman, Babak, and Mariam.

Offline Fieldnotes. June 2020, Early Afternoon. In a sunlit corner of a Seattle café, far from the digital surveillance networks of Tehran, Leila and I settled into what would become a revealing conversation about exile, resistance, and the complexities of Iranian identity. A 34-year-old Iranian expatriate, Leila is highly educated and works for a nonprofit foundation to leverage NGOs to support research and learning exchanges. The steam rising from our coffee cups created what I came to think of as an "affectosphere" – a safe space where emotions and politics

could intertwine freely, unlike the monitored digital spaces that many Iranians navigate daily. Leila sat down, pushed back her black locks of hair behind her ears, and we began chatting. Having known her for years, the conversation ran the gamut of our own personal lives to graduate school. Leila, highly attuned to problems within Iranian society on a global and local scale, "I won't go back until there's real change," Leila stated firmly, her fingers tracing the rim of her cup. When I asked her if she would ever return to Iran for family or work, she said: "Not today, not tomorrow, but maybe 10 years from now. There would need to be regime change." Her words carried the weight of unexpected ways that displacement shapes identity, what scholar Hamid Naficy calls an accented identity, wherein the liminal space of exile fosters political entanglement. She is part of the brain drain, herself describing an impoverished economic system due to sanctions leading to her not wanting to return to Iran for the foreseeable future.

Looking back, the café's ambient chatter contrasted with the careful self-censorship required in other Iranian digital spaces as described by participants. In the café, Leila could speak freely about her work, which I understood as a form of what James Scott (1985) terms "everyday resistance" or Asef Bayat's (2009) "quiet encroachment." Through her NGO activities, she quietly challenged the state's information control policies while building bridges through cultural diplomacy. "We find ways," she explained, "to share knowledge despite the barriers." The concept of *jang-e narm*, or soft war, repeatedly emerged in our conversation. Leila described how the Iranian state uses information controls to shape narratives and suppress dissent, both within its borders and across the diaspora. "They see knowledge exchange as a threat," she said, "because it disrupts their control over the story." Her work, then, represented a form of resistance to this soft war, a way of countering state narratives by creating alternative networks and platforms for dialogue. The significance of our meeting extended beyond its content. The physical setting – a Western café rather than a monitored digital platform – felt like a third place because transnational identities could be freely negotiated. I noticed the unfiltered narratives – stories that emerge when the usual digital constraints are lifted. Through Leila's narrative, we see the emergence of what could be called "resistance through expertise" – using

professional networks and knowledge exchange to challenge state control systems. Her story exemplifies how Iranian expatriates create "flexible citizenship," adapting with transnational capital (Ong 1999: 140).

In Seattle, my dissertation research engaged with Iranian gamers online and offline who voiced their desire to have Internet access and regime change in the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). Leila's position as a highly educated professional working in the nonprofit sector represents something paramount to the Iranian experience, specifically broader themes of digital resistance, socio-political challenges, and transnational identity. Because Iranians like Leila are part of a mass exodus of highly educated Iranians, her conversation with me reflects dissatisfaction with Iran's political and economic conditions, such as sanctions and regime policies. While the state experiences this loss of human capital and the public sphere experiences a direct loss to resistance efforts inside Iran, Leila assists in fostering a transnational Iranian identity, where expatriates engage in knowledge sharing and advocacy from abroad to help others. When taken together, Leila's and other gamers' stories show how their lived experiences, rooted in everyday practices and interactions, are central to understanding the influence of state policies and global networks on Iranian society.

For instance, Leila's explicit statement about not returning to Iran without a regime change is emblematic of a broader pattern of resistance among educated Iranians living abroad. In my analysis, I define this resistance in terms of "soft war" as a form of non-violent, cultural, and informational warfare employed against state control. Soft war involves strategies that subvert official narratives through digital platforms and international collaborations, challenging the state's monopoly on information. Because I explore how Iranians navigate and resist state control through various means, including digital platforms and international networks, the casual

setting of the meeting at a Seattle café contrasts the informal digital spaces often monitored and controlled by the Iranian state. Our candid discussion in a physical environment provided a special "affectosphere" in which the emotional and social spaces where Iranians negotiate their relationship with their homeland and its political realities.

Leila's work with NGOs positions her at the intersection of soft war and international cooperation. NGOs have emerged as key intermediaries within the international community. These organizations facilitate research partnerships, cultural exchanges, and knowledge transfer while under strict governmental oversight. Through these channels, individuals like Leila engage in resistance that challenge state control over information flows while contributing to global knowledge exchange. Her reference to sanctions and their impact on Iran's impoverished economic system demonstrates how international political tensions materialize in Iranian citizens' daily lives and decisions. Her work represents a form of resistance to the state's information control policies while contributing to global knowledge exchange and cultural diplomacy. Through Leila's narrative, it becomes evident how individual stories contribute to a more extensive understanding of the relationship between digital culture, political resistance, and transnational Iranian identity. Our seemingly casual conversations thus revealed deeper patterns of political resistance, cultural negotiation, and transnational identity formation among Iranian expatriates, all of which are central to understanding the contemporary Iranian online and offline experience.

Gamers in Iran often create a community as a shared experience of solidarity among other gamers, perhaps through a Discord server, so that they can navigate the peculiar frustrations of gaming in Iran. A frustration-laden joke like being "the biggest threat" revealed a sophisticated political consciousness recognizing the absurdity of blocking video games while

critiquing the broader digital control system. Through months of these digital interactions, I understood how gaming platforms had become landscapes of cultural exchange where political resistance and entertainment intertwined. The constant threat of disconnection, far from discouraging these gamers, had fostered a resilient community that used humor and shared experiences to maintain their digital connections despite state intervention. This moment captures the complexity of digital life in contemporary Iran, where even the act of playing *DOTA 2* becomes entangled with broader questions of state control, resistance, and community formation. The gamers' ability to joke about their situation while navigating its very real constraints demonstrates the sophisticated ways young Iranians maintain their digital lives in the face of state restrictions.

Despite initiatives to expand Internet access through President Mohamed Khatami's relaxation of censorship, the 2005 election increased censorship. By 2009, social media platforms were further censored in the name of "securitization of Iran's domestic political environment" (Grace 2020). At the same time, the dynamics of stratification and unequal information have consequently been amplified during Internet blackouts. By linking how Iranian gamers experience an online reality through their own culture, I explore the process of intersubjective meaning-making as these gamers confront soft war and invoke resistance tactics. By revealing Iranians' challenges in accessing online gaming as intimately tied to US and Iranian government decision-making, a minefield of political and bureaucratic practices, my study clarifies socio-political theater influences on social online and offline world-making through technology.

One late night in October 2022, I was playing with Arman when suddenly, his screen froze mid-game. Confused by the reason, I asked if it was a technical glitch or some VPN issue.

He whispered, “Not again.” And then his voice crackled over Discord, responding to my question. “I think I need to switch VPNs, maybe, for this game.” *DOTA 2* had been experiencing blocks and disruptions from the government in September. After a brief pause, Arman came back online, and we began playing again. “The VPN was fine, but my Internet slowed down.” Arman’s Internet connection had been throttled, making it difficult to play temporarily. We then talked about Iran’s Internet history, which would help me understand how gamers like him had come to expect and navigate such interruptions. As Arman waited for his game to unfreeze, he reflected on how the Internet used to be. “You know what, it wasn’t always like this,” he explained. He then recounted memories of the early 2000s when Internet cafes first appeared in Tehran, “There was a point when we could just log on without any interruption.” We then sat there and chatted about how his older cousin had been part of the blogging scene and was part of a generation that discovered new ways to voice political dissent online.

When the state’s Cyber Police (FATA) monitors online activities, or the Ministry of Information and Communications throttles and shuts down the Internet, or even when the Basij Cyber Council monitors online activity but spreads disinformation, these moments solicit a direct response from users.[27] Thus, the state has mechanisms to respond to any digital awakening swiftly and technically. As Arman explained the various control methods like “throttling,” he did so with a knowing laugh, demonstrating the technical literacy that gamers here had developed. I began to understand how the Iranian government had constructed an extensively implemented and regulated Internet.

On other occasions, and as Arman or Babak often reminded me, even with digital walls placed by the state (e.g., the filtered Internet), there were ways to work around them, and thus,

[27] “Iran: Freedom on the Net 2023 Country Report.” 2023. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-net/2023

we could play games together. “VPNs are like water,” Babak said, “they find a way through,” I recalled this metaphor throughout my field research when Babak talked and played games. On one occasion, Babak and Arman chatted with me about the 2009 Green Revolution when activists managed to share their protests with the world despite YouTube and Facebook blocks. Our conversation took on additional nuance when Arman added, “I mean, I remember some terrorist groups and the US military, even, like to recruit in COD lobbies.” Babak chimed in immediately, “Saboteurs.” Arman laughed, “Yeah, my friend.” Their banter revealed a shared awareness of how, far from being neutral, gaming spaces often became sites of political and military influence. This awareness added another layer to their critique of state control, as they recognized the broader geopolitical forces shaping their digital experiences.

The irony of the situation was not lost on my participants. While the state attempted to control digital spaces through soft war, they simultaneously pushed to expand the technology sector. Arman referenced the state’s efforts to create domestic alternatives to Western media. “They want us to play their games instead,” Arman explained. This strategy aimed to prevent what the government saw as the infiltration of foreign ideas and culture through digital means (Blout 2017). For the gamers I spent the most time with, this contradiction between digital development and digital control became a constant source of frustration and dark humor.

For Arman and Babak, gameplay becomes a significant space that illustrates a deep element beyond leisure. Although they would not describe themselves as political, the “dramatization” of politics as a space of humor affords them happiness and reprieve. Meanwhile, the Internet provides opportunities for gamers across the globe to connect. However, the inequality of access becomes even more starkly contrasted with gamers like Babak and Arman. The Internet, social media, and games have thus enabled dissent among non-state actors through

modes of quiet encroachment (Bayat 2009: 48). By placing the semi-structured interviews and unstructured instants and moments with Iranian gamers like Arman and Babak in the context of quiet encroachment, we can understand their views about the government, Internet access, and online gaming as an ordinary act of resilience to the IRI's soft war. Instead of revolutionary protest, Iranian gamers use virtual private networks (VPNs) to mask their online location or other methods like proxies or alternate DNS servers.[28] Iranian gamers experience politics as ordinary life through this quiet form of dissent. The political infrastructure forces Iranians to seek ways to live their immersive, performative, and interactive lives via online gaming. A complex dynamic of online gaming and state control of Internet access informs this way of being.

Through modes of soft war and soft power, the government's authoritarian regime has sought to mitigate citizens' access to the entire Internet and popular cultural artifacts like video games. Thus, the IRI envisioned a state with informal controls, such as influencing the types of game content produced in the Iranian video game industry, and formal controls, such as Internet censorship (Rahimi 2015). In following the narrative of Mariam, her crucial insight is one representative of deep play as a form of soft war towards the government's attempt to control the Internet. "It is like this challenge to citizens to comply," Mariam said, "Well, why would I want to comply just to play a game? Seems silly." To examine the politics of the everyday in Iran within the context of gamers and the Iranian Internet bureaucratic practices, this dissertation first addresses the entangled history of the development of the Internet, namely the proliferation of blogging and social media in Iran. Throughout this chapter on new media information controls, I analyze the dominant discourses invoked by the government through soft war and state

[28] DNS stands for Domain Name System. A DNS packet refers to a small piece of data sent through the Internet which then translates to human-readable websites. Proxy servers are an intermediary between user and the Internet that allows you to hide your IP address. A proxy server is basically a "middleman" for accessing censored websites.

censorship and the embodied soft war of non-state actors seeking full Internet access. As I discuss the state's role in Internet censorship, I weave together historical moments and cultural modes of being from citizens' perspectives.

Through technical and legal control, the Iranian government disrupted Internet use by throttling connection speeds and even complete Internet blackouts, making it difficult for Iranian citizens to use the Internet. To illustrate these dynamics, I use media reports, participant observation, interviews, and historical frameworks to elucidate the ethnographic palimpsest that I have conducted across multiple online platforms. By building out the histories of the IRI's information controls across the Internet through social media and blogging, I aim to lay the groundwork for Chapter 2: "Bill for Protection of Internet Users and Cyber Oppression," leading up to the recent protests in the IRI.

Iranian Internet & Blogging

Digital Ethnography Fieldnotes. August 2021. Late in the night. Arman, a 26-year-old Iranian living in Tehran, spoke with me over Discord. He has been playing games since he can remember. He grew up with Babak. They are best friends. Since it came out, they have always played 5v5 on DOTA 2. Together, they let go of certain worries about life. Arman and Babak's humor almost always took center stage when we discuss the various issues they are having in typical gamer and memer fashion. Pressing down on my shift key to activate my mic, I asked Arman about growing up in Iran with Internet issues. "Growing up, I was angry to not have access to my favorite games and stuff not being available. I didn't know how to use a VPN…." I then asked, "When did you have a grasp of using them?" Arman replied, "When I was a bit older, in high school, and then asked around. Like, how can I implement one to skip filtering? Etc. And then I figured it out." I said, "It must be frustrating to deal with all that, like we definitely take it for granted in the US." Arman replied, "Governments are annoying. I just want to play games with friends as a sort of escape from life's realities. But because of the government's meddling, I always have to look for a workaround if a VPN breaks or whatever. Playing games shouldn't be political."

Looking back as Arman recounted his "angry" childhood, his frustration by the restricted access to his "favorite games" due to government censorship and filtering is all too normalized

among Iranian gamers. As Arman grew older, he learned to navigate these restrictions, "asking around" and figuring out how to "implement a VPN" to bypass the government's "filtering." This shared, community-driven knowledge reflects the tactical ingenuity of their digital resistance, embodying the everyday practices (de Certeau 1984). Arman's statement, "Playing games shouldn't be political," revealed a crucial paradox. While he desired an apolitical gaming space to escape life's realities, the government's meddling inevitably led to politicization in gaming. This tension between escape and engagement is a central theme in Arman's experience.

My discussion with Arman late in the night over the transnational platform of Discord further shows the temporal and spatial dynamics at play wherein gaming becomes a field for both interactive narratives and a digital place, creating a dynamic process and multiple temporalities (Ahmed 2004; Dinshaw 2007; Binswanger & Zimmerman 2018). The digital refuge of nocturnal gaming allows Arman and Babak to maintain their friendship and community, even as they grapple with the realities of living under digital authoritarian control. Arman's awareness of the stark contrast between his experience and the "we definitely take it for granted in the US" reflects a comparative digital consciousness. As Arman and Babak navigate digital spaces, they must draw on their understanding of local constraints and global possibilities, weaving together cultural knowledge and technical practices in their everyday acts of resistance through mere gameplay. Throughout our conversation, Arman's use of "typical gamer and memer fashion" to discuss the "various issues they are having" demonstrates the role of humor and vernacular resistance. As a coping mechanism and community-binding practice, this gaming-inflected humor is another form of tactical resistance. Arman and Babak's daily gaming and community-building practices with others show us how resistance takes shape in unexpected places. As they share knowledge, nurture friendships, and carve out spaces for themselves, they

transform gaming platforms into sites of meaningful connection and subtle defiance. Arman and Babak's story reveals how people find ways to breathe freely even within digital constraints, turning technical know-how and social bonds into quiet acts of everyday resistance.

The late-night gaming sessions between Arman and Babak reflect a longer historical trajectory of digital resistance in Iran, where recreational spaces become inadvertently politicized through state intervention. Their frustrations with access and creative ways of circumventing restrictions are not isolated experiences but rather part of a broader pattern of state control and citizen resistance that has characterized Iran's relationship with digital technologies since the early 2000s. To understand how Iranian gamers like Arman and Babak have come to navigate these digital constraints, we must examine the historical development of Internet control in Iran and the state's evolving approach to digital governance. What is the history of the politicization of the Internet? How have Internet users come to grasp the lack of access?

With the growth of information and communication technology, the Iranian state has sought to invoke soft war by curtailing full Internet access, consequently impacting gamers' user experience. After the advent of Internet cafes in the early 2000s, blogging became a powerful means of communicating political opposition to the state (Cohoon 2022: 2). The Iranian government (IRI) has taken several steps to control Internet access. These include slowing down Internet speeds, blocking certain websites and search terms, deliberately making connections unreliable, intercepting secure Internet traffic to spy on users, and even shutting down the Internet entirely.[29] These measures are made possible by the government's technical capabilities and political control over the Internet infrastructure. Despite the sophisticated infrastructure of Internet surveillance, minor impediments such as Internet filtering are easily bypassed by users

[29] This includes HTTP host and prohibiting certain terms, connection throttling, SSL/TLS man-in-the-middle (MITM) attacks, and even full Internet blackout.

using virtual private networks. This mainly occurred during the 2009 Green Revolution, wherein the Iranian government blocked YouTube and Facebook. Censorship is particularly frustrating as the IRI lacks the social and cultural capital to reach out and garner support.[30] This has been made evident in popular culture, and even during the instances where Iranian activists share videos and news to showcase their protests against the election results, which will be further discussed in the social media section of this chapter. Through these censorship mitigation tactics, the Iranian government seeks to implement censorship through several levels of bureaucracy. Yet, the state also desires to expand the information technology sector to maintain a particular cultural narrative. Part of the Iranian government's *jang-e narm* strategy is to create their own cultural products, such as video games, and to curtail the flow of information through the Internet to prevent "the spread of foreign ideas, culture and influences through information communication technology" into Iran (Blout 2017: 212; Cohoon 2022). For gamers, curtailing media access is an interesting point of discussion.

Late one evening on Discord, Arman and Babak's conversation drifted from their usual game strategy to the frustrations of Iran's Internet restrictions. "The government wants us not to have access, so we don't have a 'Western brain,'" Arman said with a guffaw as we heard his fingers moving across the keyboard. Babak laughed, not taking his eyes off the screen. "This isn't some magical meet-up overthrow," he replied, using the term *daneshmand* with the kind of ironic tone that frequently punctuated such conversations about state control. Their banter continued as they played, mixing gaming terminology with political commentary in the casual way that characterized many of the late-night conversations I observed with them. "Dear friends,

[30] Narges Bajoghli in particular makes this type of argument with regards to challenges to state sanctioned film versus actual cultural producers of film. Bajoghli, Narges. 2019. *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 80.

please pass this on. Tired of that 2G," Babak announced to no one in particular after his character lagged and died. Arman nodded in solidarity, adding his wish for "good ping, the American Dream." The way they seamlessly wove together gaming frustrations with broader political critique exemplified how young Iranians navigate state restrictions through humor and shared experience (Michaelsen 2018). These moments in the gaming café revealed how technical issues like poor connectivity became entry points for broader discussions about digital inequality and state control (Aryan et al. 2013). The gamers' easy mixing of technical complaints with political humor showed how digital spaces, even those meant purely for entertainment, became sites where young Iranians collectively processed and challenged their digital constraints.

While information technology and the Internet are recent inventions, the development of the telegraph and the telephone services are proto-inventions of the Internet that allow for quick information transmission over great distances. These proto-Internet inventions created a more interconnected world. In 1858, Nasir al-Din Shah built Iran's first telegraph line merely 13 years after Samuel Morse sent the first telegram from Washington, DC (Rubin 2019). The Ministry of Post and Telegraph and Telephone was established in 1908 as an extension of the Iranian Postal Bureau. As technology evolved, the Ministry of Post and Telegraph and Telephone became the Ministry of Information and Communication in 2003 under President Mohammad Khatami. This bureaucratic institution eventually established a national intranet in 2005.[31] As a result, the national intranet substituted the public Internet so that the government could control its citizens' media and online communications. The Iranian government sustains the Internet's functionality through an IP-based network through search engines, email, and news outlets (Cohoon 2022).

[31] An intranet is a private network that is used within an organization to securely share information, resources, and services among employees or members. It is typically restricted to authorized users and is not accessible to the general public. For Iran, this entails the National Information Network's state-controlled Internet infrastructure that prevents the free flow of information between Iran and the outside world.

Effectively, the Iranian government can monitor all incoming and outgoing media. Otherwise known as "halal Internet," Iran's national intranet specifically works much like China's Great Firewall (Ungerleider 2012). By cultivating an appropriate and non-vulgar Internet, the IRI hopes to prevent information from the West from getting into Iran. Mariam comments on the halal Internet and shutdown phenomena:

"When the Internet is disconnected, it's like being alone in the world. But when access goes uninterrupted, it's like a very calm experience because I have my friends available just at the grasp of my hands. An Internet ban also just doesn't do very much. Regulations just incentivize us to use VPNs to have the same access as the rest of the world."

Mariam's sentiment reveals crucial insights about digital connectivity, isolation, and resistance in Iran. Her statement, "When the Internet is disconnected, it's like being alone in the world," reveals how deeply virtual intimacy is woven into contemporary social existence. This sensation of isolation during disconnection demonstrates what Hillis et al. term "networked affect," where articulations of desire become inextricably linked to digital connectivity through investment, time, and labor (2015: 1). The metaphor of having "friends available just at the grasp of my hands" particularly exemplifies virtual intimacy. This tactile description transforms digital connection into an embodied experience, suggesting a "corporeal immediacy that could not be reduced to a simulation of actual-world embodiment" (Boellstorff 2008: 134). The phrase "at the grasp of my hand" is especially significant as it materializes virtual connections, making distant friends feel physically present and accessible. Moreover, Mariam's characterization of uninterrupted access as "a very calm experience" reveals how virtual intimacy functions as an emotional infrastructure. Mariam's experience invokes affective dimensions of digital connectivity, where stable Internet access creates a sense of psychological security through

sustained virtual presence (Hillis et al. 2015: 3). The contrast between the "calm" of connection and the isolation of disconnection underscores how virtual intimacy has become fundamental to emotional regulation and social well-being. These constructions of identity and digital space through emotional bonds form a resilience to digital authoritarianism.

The political dimensions of virtual intimacy also emerge in Mariam's discussion of VPNs and global access. When she stated that "an Internet ban also just doesn't do very much," she showed how virtual intimacy becomes resistance against digital authoritarianism. Virtual intimacy extends beyond personal relationships to encompass a broader sense of global belonging and rights. The desire to "have the same access as the rest of the world" demonstrates a sense of digital citizenship. At the same time, her statement on access shows how power relationships work in two directions: how individuals are subjected to power and how they themselves exercise power (Isin & Ruppert 2020: 11). This resistance through technical means (VPNs) maintains virtual intimacy and illustrates digital resilience (Castells 2012). Despite state attempts at disruption, the determination to preserve these intimate digital connections shows how virtual intimacy has become a personal necessity and a political imperative. The very act of circumventing restrictions to maintain these digital relationships becomes a form of resistance through intimacy. Mariam's statement thus reveals virtual intimacy as simultaneously emotional, social, and political. Her experience demonstrates how digital connections have become fundamental to contemporary forms of intimacy, where the ability to maintain constant contact with friends through digital means creates a sense of emotional security and social presence. The political resistance to maintaining these connections further shows how virtual intimacy is a personal necessity and a form of contestation against digital authoritarianism.

The initial desire to create such an extensive monitoring system predates the emergent blogging culture in early 2001 (Kelly & Etling 2008). For the Iranian government to maintain its source of power, all media is highly surveilled. In addition to surveillance and filtering the Internet, the Iranian government also prevents independent media, whether print, broadcast, or online, from existing. However, the intranet is not merely monitored by one bureaucratic institution. Rather than a mere bureaucratic structure, like the Ministry of Information and Communication, several other political, judicial, military, parliament, and even clerical institutions monitor and control the Internet (Castells 2009; Aryan et al. 2013; Marchant & Robertson 2015a, 2015b). By creating a complex set of bureaucratic institutions to maintain a highly censored Internet, the system often leads to ruptures that are intersubjectively shared among Iranian users, mirroring China's tools, tactics, and level of repression, especially when considering that Iran planned to work closely with China in 2020 to tighten censorship (Rubin 2019; Esfandiari 2020). A complete Internet shutdown foreclosing Iranians from connecting with the outside world casts a traumatic light on the state of the Internet in Iran. However, the landscape of data travel evokes an interesting set of assemblages and spatialities for Iranian users, whose footprint is still present (Akbari 2020: 408).

While lack of access produces an interwoven set of ruptures that block active engagement in pleasurable acts like online social activities, users still find a way to access using circumvention tools to access the Internet. While there is "an environment of intense transnational communication and information exchange," the Iranian digital authoritarian regime monitors and responds, "to the activities of political exiles rapidly and on a large scale" (Michaelsen 2018: 248). Meanwhile, Internet shutdowns impact Iranian business owners and entrepreneurs, losing essential income as they depend on communication technologies to

advertise.[32] For gamers like Babak and Arman, having access to their community is paramount to playing games. Being unable to play and stream content on Twitch–a live streaming platform for gamers—due to Internet disruptions or slower Internet speeds removes important daily and/or weekly interactions and essential income (Khazraee & Losey 2016: 45). Babak and Arman spoke to this during the Woman Life Freedom protests:

Babak: We've always experienced shutdown and disruption. But it has only gotten worse. Sometimes, we only have access to the big intranet.

Arman: And while we can bypass, VPNs will become illegal, and our information may be captured. We must constantly figure things out. A VPN is used to access the web, and then a second layer is used to access a game.

I noticed the tension in their exchange between state policy and resistance. When broken down into parts, Babak and Arman's exchange illustrates what Cammaerts (2013) calls "networked resistance," where users develop collective strategies to circumvent digital control. This networked, or rather, tactical resistance is evident in their discussion of VPNs, a non-violent expression or quiet encroachment. Additionally, this temporal intensification of control, emphasized by Babak's statement, "We've always experienced shutdown and disruption. But it has only gotten worse," shows how progressive digital authoritarianism can take hold in an ever-escalating cat-and-mouse game between the state and its citizenry. At the time, I noted how soft war had intensified, with the state implementing increasingly sophisticated control measures. Babak and Arman's discussion of VPN layers represents "tactics" – the everyday practices through which people navigate systems of control, further emphasizing that they were enacting tactical resistance to soft war (de Certeau 1984). Online soft war thus aligns with infrastructural

[32] "Iranians Sustain Huge Losses Due To Government Internet Shutdowns." 2023. Iran International. https://www.iranintl.com/en/202303181932

power, wherein the state uses digital infrastructure as a mechanism of control. Yet, my conversation with Babak and Arman demonstrates an ongoing evolution of digital resistance, showing how users must constantly adapt to increasingly sophisticated forms of state control while managing personal risk and technical complexity.

Initially, Iran's Internet emerged in the early 1990s to promote scientific and technological advancement, as well as to bolster the economy post-Iran-Iraq War (Rahimi 2003: 102). During the nascent stages of the Internet, the Iranian government sought to use it for communication yet, at the same time, granted access to the commercial and educational sectors with minimal censorship (2003: 104). The national academic network (IPM) and the High Council of Information (HCI), as well as other bureaucratic spheres like the Data Communication Company of Iran (DCI) that fell under the Ministry of Post, Telephone and Telegraph, however, had tensions due to their perception of how the Internet should function and be developed (Rahimi 2003; Sreberny 2010). As a result, these government bureaucracies experienced domestic competition with commercial Internet service providers (ISP) in 1997. Coming far from the freedom of full Internet access, in 2003, the Iranian government eventually developed a conservative approach to the Internet by blocking specific websites and filtering content. In 2004, blogging became increasingly popular, coinciding with the increase in the number of Internet users. The Iranian population went from 250,000 users in 2000 to 7.5 million users in 2005 (Rhoads 2006). By 2005, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei ordered the creation of a national intranet called the National Information Network (NIN). The inception of NIN also coincided with the popularity of blogging as a means of subverting the IRI national narrative.

NIN houses an "Internet-based network with switches, routers, and data centers so that internal access requests for information stored in the internal data center are not routed abroad at all."[33] In unequivocal terms, this refers to the censorship of Internet content and restriction of access to websites, which the Supreme Council of Cyberspace deems intelligent filtering of the Internet to conform to Islamic principles. However, reducing the goal of Iranian government's administrative system, which comprises several departments, to merely creating an Islamic Internet obfuscates the complexity of the Iranian cyber-political landscape. Since the government's inception in 1979, the state has been a multifaceted system with elements of nationalism and Islamic Shia principles undergirded by modern state structures (Khiabany 2018: 218). For instance, the Iranian government's constitution established democratic principles and theocratic elements. The constitutional framework consists of an executive, a parliamentary, and a judicial body overseen by clerics.

The head leadership oversees the people's will through *velayat-e faqih*, the rule of the supreme jurist. These very governmental bodies have thus adopted ICTs to make a socio-political and cultural online space yet simultaneously thwart perceived contentious political aspirations such as protestors. While some have argued that the public, whether online and/or offline, is a distinct space for politics to thrive, separate from the social and private spheres, the very essence of the Internet, perhaps even living, blurs these supposedly distinct spaces (Falsairi & Ghanavizi 2015: 124). As private and social life dynamics transfuse into the public sphere through localized cultural realms, an affective entanglement forces users into expression, perception, and decision-making (Dugaw 2001: 26). Affect forms a part of the deep play on the

[33] "Approvals of the 15th Session of the Supreme Council of Cyberspace regarding the Definition Requirements Governing the Realization of the National Information and Budget Network in 2015 of the National Cyberspace Center." 2014. Supreme Council of Cyberspace, no. 20082. http://www.rrk.ir/Laws/ShowLaw.aspx?Code=1640.

Internet where all spheres of life coalesce, producing cultural spaces where "multiple levels of structure, explanation, and meaning intersect and condense," producing a phantasmagoria of meaning structuring the terrain of everyday life that cannot be contained, specifically in terms of blogging. Blogging becomes a political form of deep play, converging as a nonmovement.

Because we live in an increasingly interconnected world, Iranian bloggers curated a virtual space that fostered the emergence of a broader public, becoming a popular part of everyday life in the 2000s. The government would have none of it. The Iranian government's National Information Network (NIN) program enables authorities to maintain selective Internet access, allowing domestic services like search engines, email, and news sites to function, while simultaneously restricting international traffic, particularly during periods of protest (Cohoon 2022: 2). Unfortunately, this also entails the type of content that is accessible. While international embargoes, from the United States' maximum pressure campaign to sanctions, have also forced NIN to become more sophisticated, blogging was a double-edged sword. When I asked about the relationship between Internet controls and blogging, Arman responded:

*Arman: Oh, the times of Blogfather. Yeah…some bloggers were imprisoned. I remember Sattar Beheshti dying. Because, you know, it is SOOOO unlike the administration to clean up Evin. *Sarcasm**

Arman's reference to "the times of Blogfather" immediately situates his statement within a specific historical moment in Iran's digital history, when blogging emerged as a powerful platform for political expression and dissent. The mention of Sattar Beheshti, an activist and blogger who was beaten to death by Iran's Cyber Police in 2012, stresses the severe

consequences of digital activism under authoritarian regimes.[34] Beheshti's death became a symbol of the state's violent suppression of dissent, mainly targeting those who used digital platforms to challenge its authority. Arman's sarcastic remark about the administration "cleaning up Evin" represents a humorous reaction to horror yet a subtle act of resistance that critiques power structures while maintaining plausible deniability. He not only criticizes the state's failure to address systemic issues like prison conditions but also highlights the absurdity of expecting accountability from an administration known for its repression.

This moment also reveals the interplay between memory and resistance in digital spaces. By invoking the "Blogfather" era, Arman connects past and present struggles, showing how the memory of earlier forms of digital activism continues to inform contemporary critiques of state power. His statement exemplifies a sociohistorical process and narrative construction while simultaneously embracing ambiguity through the power of storytelling, or in other words, narratives are shaped by collective memory and the construction of history (Trouillot 1995: 24). Arman thus became enraptured at the moment through memory, producing a specific collective memory (Saramifar 2019; Nørgård 2016). Furthermore, the casual tone of Arman's comment, delivered in a conversational setting, highlights the role of informal social interactions in sustaining political critique. These moments of shared memory and humor through ritual habit create a feeling of intense bonding, connection, and solidarity, creating "communitas" – a sense of solidarity among those with a common experience of oppression and resistance (Turner 1969).

The government attacked popular bloggers in Iran who used their platform as a form of liberation, the blogosphere, otherwise known as weblogistan. Some bloggers, such as Sina

[34] "Iran Must Immediately Investigate Blogger's Death in Custody." 2021. Amnesty International. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2012/11/iran-must-immediately-investigate-blogger-s-death-custody/.

Motallebi's blog, faced state scrutiny and were ultimately banned by the government, leading to his arrest on April 20, 2003 (Bucar & Fazaeli 2008). Accused of being a threat to national security, the Iranian government cited that Motallebi's journalistic and weblogging endeavors, as well as his interaction with Iranian diasporic media, led to his detention.

Figure 1.1 Cartoon memeing the IRI's perspective of bloggers in Iran.[35] /Credit NBC

"Going around is about ordinary things: eating, sleeping, joking, talking, making love, getting angry, reading a book, wandering, protesting, being afraid... that is, living. The twenty-year-old chatter of the school of politics has taken many hearts, and a few are determined to serve their beloved." -Salman Jariri, First Persian blogger, remarks on Hafez and Life on January 9, 2002[36]

[35] NBC News. 2009. [Slideshow]. https://www.nbcnews.com/slideshow/slideshow-31567355
[36] Jariri, Salman. [9 January 2002] [19 December 1380]. *Salman's Weblog* (2002). https://www.globalpersian.com/archive/020101.html

In a way, blogging was a "go-along" method for coping with physical and digital authoritarianism, a way of navigating a controlled environment in a serious yet not-so-serious manner, much like gaming. Jariri emphasized this profound feeling of wanting to simply do everyday, completely ordinary things while emphasizing that nothing political can be seen here. Rather than simply of political consequence, blogging was and is also a multilayered space for deep play – that affords an overlap of the imagination, socialization, and cultural and political processes. Salman Jariri's reflection on ordinary life resonates deeply with gamers because it underscores the human desire to live freely, even in the face of oppression. Much like blogging, gaming allows individuals to "go along" with the system while simultaneously subverting it. It provides a space for creativity, connection, and even subtle forms of protest, all while maintaining a sense of playfulness and detachment. This serious yet not-so-serious duality mirrors how Iranian bloggers have historically used their platforms to navigate the tensions between personal expression and political risk.

Deep play is defined as a dramatic space where risks are taken. Performance flows and diffuses in the space in a "string of flashes or aesthetic quanta" (Geertz 1973:24). As such, deep play allows Internet users and gamers access to a complex social matrix where tensions of status, selfhood, and spectacle merge to engage in critical political discourses. Deep play then takes shape in online blogging and social media profiles. Gaming also involves high-stakes scenarios, dramatic narratives, and immersive experiences, allowing players to explore complex social and political dynamics. In Iran, where digital spaces are heavily monitored and censored, gaming becomes a form of rupture—a way to momentarily escape, challenge, or reimagine the constraints of authoritarianism. Much like blogging, the affective intensity of gaming creates a shared experience that fosters solidarity and a sense of community, even in the face of fear and

repression. Therefore, Iranians experience deep play through various multimodal approaches to digital authoritarianism, from online video games to blogging through dramatic incidents, historical memory of the past, and a strong sense of community. Through rupture, or the affective entanglement of fear, online bloggers form an instance of deep play that revolves around an affective intensity. The production of rupture for Iranian bloggers entails an experience catapulting them into a high-stakes situation with the Iranian state, resulting in heightened emotions and political protest.

Networked protest participants in Iran are essential to pushing back against policies that seek to mitigate their Internet access. One is Telegram, a cross-platform cloud-based messenger that provides end-to-end encryption and social media to suppress non-state actors from dissenting. The desire to cull threats to the Iranian government through online methods did not necessarily begin during the advent of social media. While Iranians used sites like Twitter or Facebook, Iran's Persian social networking site Balatarin provided a platform for users to share links and post comments to promote interactivity nationally and internationally. Blogging became one of the first online methods for Iranians to express themselves self-reflexively and provide a political outlet. Balatarin was hacked in 2009 by pro-government online activists and Basij cyber forces on February 3, 2009 (Rahimi & Rassooli 2015: 191).

With widespread online mobilization among some bloggers, Iranians wrote online as forms of self-exploration, interactions, and hyperlinking sites to garner interest from readers. Rather than the act of blogging shaping Iranian behavior, it was an outlet to reflect on their offline experiences virtually. Blogging may come across as trivial, but it can often be overlooked when analyzing culture, especially the "pronunciations of desire that underlie" it (Behrouzan 2016: 133). While several bloggers self-censored their platform to avoid transgressing social

norms, avoiding practices considered vulgar by the state, and jeopardizing their respectability, others began establishing their truth or *baazi-ye veblogi* (blog game) present their authentic Iranian experience, structured through socio-cultural norms and pressures from the state and foreign governments. In many ways, authenticity and truth-telling provided Iranian bloggers an outlet, or even affective entanglement of rapture–an intensity or manifestation of joy—despite their socio-political reality. Through blogging, some Iranians felt they could engage in a virtual democracy. As a result, some bloggers produced an experience that took the form of cyber-activism against the state.

While blogs became popularized, Silicon Valley released Web 2.0 in late 2004 as a user-generated and participatory culture for Internet users. As such, this allowed users to interconnect in new ways that static Web 1.0 did not provide due to its basic HTML encoding. Through a new social media and user-generated virtual community, users became less passive and could share more collaborative content. As a result of Web 2.0, spaces like Balatarin 2006 became popular among users, allowing for a dialogical space for Iranians. Iranian social media users produced discourse and meaning-making in their offline worlds by creating a dialogical space through hyperlinking and cross-referencing other sites. At the same time, Iran witnessed an end to the Mohammad Khatami presidency, wherein before new media began to emerge in the private sector, high-speed fiber-optic cables were put in place for the Internet. However, Iranian post-election dismay manifested as a disillusioned and marked affect, especially among students at Tehran University. Despite some dissidents protesting the vote of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the crux of his disputed second victory would amount to the 2009 Green Revolution.

In 2011, the "halal Internet," an advanced version of the national intranet, was fully launched by Ali Agha-Mohammadi, a former deputy vice president of economic affairs and

member of the Iranian Parliament.[37] As such, the Iranian government enacted a master plan to further develop Internet and communication technologies alongside Internet censorship by establishing a completely walled and closed-off system. The Supreme Council for Cyberspace eventually became the centralized agency responsible for cyber politics by 2012, established under Ayatollah Khamenei (Aryan et al. 2013). Since the national intranet's inception, the Iranian government's bureaucratic censorship has manifested as temporary blocking of sites like Telegram, social media, and blogging sites, which consequently has led to the imprisonment of Iranian citizens. Tasked in governing the usage of Internet points, filtering, and blocking of websites and Internet shutdowns, the Supreme Council has three bodies that are associated with censorship. For instance, the Iran Cyber Police, known as the FATA, monitors Iranian online activities, which leads to the prosecution of so-called online dissidents (Kargar 2018).

Meanwhile, the Committee for Determining Offensive Contents controls censorship policies, updating lists of censored websites. At the same time, the Iran Cyber Army, the Revolutionary Guard Cyber Defense Command, prevents cyber-attacks and implements counterattacks (Aryan et al. 2013). Despite these countermeasures enacted by this censorship infrastructure to maintain a filtered Internet, Iranian Internet users find workarounds to gain access to popular websites, social media, and even cell phone applications like WhatsApp.

2009 to Present: When Soft War Becomes Hard War

Social, political, and cultural reconfiguration through censorship and protest led to moments of resistance during the Green Revolution in Iran and throughout the Middle East. Like

[37] The Iranian Parliament, known as the *Majles-e Shoraye Eslami* or *Majles* for short, is the legislative body of Iran. "Iran's Halal Internet." 2012. Al Jazeera. https://web.archive.org/web/20120101071405/http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/halal-Internet

the Internet, blogging and social media became heavily regulated in Iran. Despite censorship policies and authoritarian prowess, media and Internet culture in Iran and the Middle East have led to the galvanization of the masses against their respective governments' injustices, manifested as the 2009 Iranian Green Revolution, the Arab Spring, and Turkey's Gezi Park protests. Some argue that social media has created more momentum for protestors in the Middle East, thereby weakening authoritarian regimes and leading to accountability, suggesting the democratizing potential for new media tools (Kharroub 2015). During the 2009 Iranian Green Revolution, the Iranian government viewed social media as a tool to utilize and a methodology to undermine the cultural values of the Islamic Republic. This led the Cyber Police organization, under the jurisdiction of the police force (NAJA), perhaps with the assistance of IRGC and Basij forces,[38] to suppress the digital public sphere by using Internet disruptions and monitoring online communications in 2011.[39] Throughout 2009, however, the government ordered a nationwide Internet shutdown in response to activists and journalists using their cellphones to share the human rights violations against protestors, although some users could get through the block using telcos (Nunes 2023).[40]

As a form of soft war, online control has led to weaponized propaganda and, therefore, has real-world implications among citizens. For the Internet and gaming, Iranian citizens have

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[38] The Green Revolution was part of the impetus for establishing the Cyber Police, but was raised by leadership as early as 2005. The Iranian government had its thumb on the protestors' dissent and resistance techniques, thereby cracking down on the Internet and social media use. The NAJA (the regular police force) essentially established the Cyberspace Police (*polis-e faza-ye towlid va tabadol-e ettelaat*, or FATA) in 2011 (Jones & Newlee 2019).

[39] "Iran: Violent Crackdown on Protestors Widens." (June). Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/news/2009/06/23/iran-violent-crackdown-protesters-widens. "Iran's cyber posture." 2013. Open Briefing. https://www.openbriefing.org/intelligence-desks/middle-east-and-north-africa/irans-cyber-posture/ According to Open Briefing site, a "Cyber Defense Command (*Qarargah-e Defa-e Sayberi*) was established under the jurisdiction of the Passive (or Civil) Defence Organisation (*Sazeman-e Padafand-e gheyr-e amel*) and ultimately, the Joint Staff of the Armed Forces. Headed by Brigadier-General Gholam-Reza Jalali, the Passive Defence Organisation has also over recent years overseen a large number of country-wide cyber readiness drills."

[40] Telcos means telecommunication services in and outside of Iran.

difficulty accessing basic news websites and social media; therefore, they must use workarounds to skirt censorship. National politics during the 2009 Iranian presidential debates, while initially producing lively and colorful campaigns, skewed remarkably green in support of Mir-Hossein Mousavi. The crackdown against protestors, who used social media as a method to enhance their movement, came to the fore after the presidential elections in Iran. On June 12, 2009, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was reelected with 63% of the vote. During this time, the ubiquity of the Internet in cafes or at home and through texting on cell phones allowed Iranians to protest the presidential election results. Iranians largely rejected the incumbent President Ahmadinejad, reporting irregularities in voting. During their protest of the election results, Iranians used social media to access sites like Facebook and Twitter to document their lives.

The movement had cascading green across the boulevards with picketing signs stating, "Where's my vote?" Met with state-sanctioned violence, a 26-year-old woman named Neda Agha-Soltan was murdered by a paramilitary known as the Basij, one of five military forces under the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. While journalists were thrown out, digital communication became the method for the Iranian citizens to show the world the Iranian government's crackdown against the public. As a result, interrogation, incarceration, and violent suppression became a method of the regime to defend Iran against the soft war, a dominant discourse in state media. Despite the eventual assuagement of chaos and violent forms of suppression from the government, the soft war continued to be a palpable method institutionally. Soft war was initially developed due to the Iran-Iraq War but was formally adopted in the early 2000s and then intensified during the Green Movement protests (Rahimi, 2015). The Ahmadinejad administration continued to propagate methods of soft war throughout his tenure

until Hassan Rouhani succeeded him. However, the president, the Supreme Leader, and the many bureaucratic institutions still highly censor the Internet and social media sites.

Instagram has become a popular way for Iranians to share their lives in a dialogical and self-reflexive way through photos, hashtags, and videos, thereby communicating with others across the globe. Through hashtags and editing filters, followers and friends flock to other users' accounts to share multimedia stories. Iran's censorship strategy on Instagram consists of mitigating information through filtering the Internet and censorship. With the ubiquity of social media, the IRI seeks to strategically take control of information that can "manipulate public opinion, garner support, and discredit opponents" and "curb 'dissenting' speech and behavior." Like Twitter during the 2009 Green Revolution, Instagram has been a staple for Iranian users to express themselves culturally, socially, and politically. Instagram, much like other social media and even blogging, allowed the Iranian government to weaponize the platform as a form of state-sanctioned violence by hacking vulnerable individuals, specifically those in the transnational diasporic community. The state's weaponization of social media platforms against the diaspora community exemplifies why skilled professionals increasingly choose exile over remaining in Iran, contributing to the ongoing brain drain that depletes the nation's intellectual and professional capital. This digital persecution, coupled with broader systemic restrictions, pushes educated Iranians like Leila to build lives abroad where they can freely express themselves without fear of surveillance or reprisal.

Offline Fieldnotes. July 2020. I met up with Leila at a local pub. I asked her about her experience and professional opinions on issues Iran has faced over the years. She said, "Many of the most critical issues our communities face fit the description of complex, wicked problems like disease, poverty, and inequality. Having witnessed the economic crisis in 2018 in Tehran, a time when many Iranians could not afford bread, butter, and hygienic products, these were and are inherently different underlying values and tradeoffs happening in Iranian society on a state level. Points of convergence that lack structural shifts in Iran hurt the lower and middle classes

the most. Strategies at the top seem not to be focused on fundamental needs. Citizen needs are overlooked."

When I chatted with Leila, I found her insights into the socio-economic challenges in Iran salient to the dissertation because of her focus on structural inequalities and governance failures. Systemic issues like those identified by Leila, such as disease, poverty, and inequality, are "wicked problems" that can be characterized as complex interdependent problems resistant to simple solutions (Rittel & Webber 1972; Head & Alford 2015). In other words, attempts to generate any solution will also "generate waves of consequences over an extended – virtually an unbounded – period of time" (1972: 15). These problems require systemic and structural changes, which are often absent in Iran's governance strategies (Peters 2017; Kokabisaghi 2018; Asadi-Lari et al. 2021). The 2018 economic crisis, where basic necessities like bread and hygienic products became unaffordable, underscores the deep structural inequalities in Iranian society. The lower and middle classes bear the brunt of these crises, reflecting a lack of equitable resource distribution. Leila critiques the state's focus on "points of convergence" that fail to address fundamental needs, leaving citizen priorities overlooked. For this to be ameliorated, the government would need to take on "strategies for dealing with wicked problems" like "reforming the managerial infrastructure of government" (Head & Alford 2015: 733). However, there is an inherent disconnect between the issues, contemporary solutions, and the willingness to commit to good governance for the people in Iran. Even in democratic regimes, such "decision-making is not good at dealing with long-term challenges," likely due to "partisan control of government" (Peters 2017: 389).

When we discussed how the IRI curtails the efforts to protest, Leila also recounted the shutdowns and how these variables of access have impacted her life. She recalls in earnest the

impacts of what would eventually lead to Bloody November, the impact of a price spike in oil that led to ample unrest among citizens.[41] "What was it like to experience Internet shutdowns though?" I asked. She said, "I often wonder why Iran has no decentralized Internet. But then, when shutdowns happen, it's a reminder of the dictatorship. It is not enjoyable and feels like purposeful isolation." Leila's perspective on "purposeful isolation" aligns with how digital authoritarianism prevents the coordination among protestors, creates psychological distress, and disrupts social bonds (Tufekci 2017; Jones 2022). This isolationism from the outside world is reminiscent of cyber-dystopia. While Leila exhibits a cyber-utopian vision of Internet freedom (Barlow 1996), authoritarian regimes like Iran have sophisticated digital infrastructure, making achieving the desired outcome difficult (Morozov 2011; Deibert & Rohozinski 2010). Leila's phrasing "it's a reminder of the dictatorship" is reminiscent of what Tufekci describes as the "capacities and signals" – when citizens must confront the extent of authoritarian digital control over their lives (2017: 54). Leila's recognition of this control is interesting because it shows how digital interruptions demonstrate state power.

As state-sanctioned online violence and harassment campaigns continue to attack diasporic communities outside of Iran, Iranian communities continue to experience the Iranian government's censorship and Internet filtering with the possibility of facing imprisonment. For users, this means upholding certain concepts of respectability without engaging in vulgar ways of being. A vulgar space or writing that uses nonintellectual language and cursing perhaps promotes norm-breaking behavior like women dancing, singing, or not wearing a hijab, which is deemed

[41] Iranians experienced a heavy-handed response and human rights abuses when protesting in 2019. Authorities used excessive force, including live ammunition and mass arrests, resulting in numerous deaths and injuries among civilians. The state lacked accountability for security forces, showcasing a systematic pattern of impunity and legal violations. Overall, the government's response not only silenced dissent but further entrenched the climate of fear and repression in the country. "Iran: No Justice for Bloody 2019 Crackdown." 2020. Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/17/iran-no-justice-bloody-2019-crackdown

illegal in Iran. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Iranians have faced an increase in censorship for supposedly deviant online behavior. Due to "vulgar and norm-breaking" behavior, an estimated hundreds of Iranians have been arrested throughout the first half of 2020. Iranian gamers must also protect themselves from possible state-sanctioned violence.

Although gamers are experiencing political frictions and asymmetrical information flows in Iran, their aspiration to play can be described as a form of soft resistance, like a passive revolution, or rather, a non-movement. Even so, underneath the gamers' optimism and desire to play, an internalized distress or rupture occurs due to lack of access, in direct opposition to the undisrupted play many Western gamers experience. Furthermore, the expressive relationship between players and games offers the player a moment of rapture or an affective state of immersion in the game world where the gamer becomes one with the rhythm of playing. Therefore, instances of rapture/rupture complicate a gamer's agency because to understand their will to play a game, one must comprehend that for a gamer, "aliveness" occurs in the online space (Nørgård 2016: 96). Frictions between rapture/rupture in online and offline worlds offer a new framework for thinking about the demands of the everyday by shedding light on how gaming is more than a simple pastime or hobby. Rather, gaming for Iranians becomes affectively entangled with their relationship to ordinary ways of living and socio-political tensions domestically through their historical memory of oppression. The politics of the everyday lead these gamers down paths of unnoticed resistance to the very structures that seek to suppress their access. Through playing, these gamers engage in the politics of the ordinary by finding joy in connecting with the actual video games in virtually real worlds, in addition to other players who play the video game in question. Active engagement online becomes a form of soft resistance

through overcoming modes of state-sanctioned soft war, affording Iranian gamers opportunities to build trust and communities with one another.

Conclusion

This ethnographic exploration highlights how personal narratives and informal interactions are critical tools for resisting authoritarian control, preserving collective memory, and shaping transnational Iranian identities. By examining the interplay between digital activism, state surveillance, and the creation of safe spaces, I revealed the resilience of individuals and communities in navigating systemic oppression. Through acts of memory, humor, and solidarity, these seemingly ordinary moments become profound expressions of political critique and cultural negotiation, offering a deeper understanding of resistance in the Iranian context. The narratives and analyses presented in this ethnographic exploration reveal the intricate interplay between digital resistance, state control, and the formation of transnational Iranian identities. Through the voices of individuals like Arman and Leila, we see how personal stories and informal conversations become powerful opportunities for critiquing authoritarianism and preserving collective memory. These narratives highlight the resilience of Iranian citizens, both within the country and in the diaspora, as they navigate the dual pressures of state surveillance and geopolitical tensions. Central to this analysis is the concept of "soft war" (*jang-e narm*), which encapsulates the Iranian state's efforts to control information and suppress dissent through both digital and physical means. The state's use of surveillance, censorship, and violence, as exemplified by the tragic death of Sattar Beheshti, underscores the high stakes of digital activism in Iran. Yet, as this chapter demonstrated, resistance persists in myriad forms, from strategically

using sarcasm and humor to creating alternative networks for knowledge exchange and cultural diplomacy.

The role of memory emerges as a critical theme, with references to the "Blogfather" era and the enduring impact of figures like Beheshti serving as touchstones for contemporary resistance. These memories are not static; they are actively maintained and transmitted through informal social interactions, creating what might be termed "archives of resistance." The past and present converge in these spaces, enabling individuals to draw strength and inspiration from earlier struggles while adapting to new challenges. This ethnographic inquiry also underscores the importance of physical and digital safe spaces in fostering unfiltered dialogue and solidarity. Whether in a Seattle café or an Internet forum, these spaces provide a refuge from the pervasive reach of state control, allowing for the emergence of "communitas," or a sense of shared purpose and connection among those who resist (Turner 1969). Ultimately, this study illuminates the complex dynamics of resistance, identity, and memory in the Iranian context. It demonstrates how seemingly ordinary moments – a sarcastic remark or casual conversation – can reveal deeper political critique patterns and cultural negotiation patterns. In doing so, it contributes to a broader understanding of the ways in which individuals and communities resist authoritarianism and assert their agency in the face of systemic oppression.

Chapter 2

The Internet Bill & The Woman Life Freedom Movement

Introduction

In September 2022, as protests erupted across Iran following the death of Mahsa Amini, the Iranian government deployed a digital iron curtain through systematic Internet shutdowns across 80 cities, targeted platform blocking, and sophisticated surveillance measures. This chapter examines how these digital control mechanisms, particularly the controversial Internet Protection Bill, represent not just technical restrictions but rather networked authoritarianism, a sophisticated system of social control operating through digital infrastructure (MacKinnon 2011: 33). The Iranian government's approach to Internet control reveals a carefully orchestrated strategy that identifies as "access-controlled" systems, where technical infrastructure becomes a means of social and political control (Deibert & Rohozinski 2010). Through an analysis of Internet shutdown patterns, platform-specific blocking, and the targeting of specific communities, particularly gamers and scholars, this chapter demonstrates how digital authoritarianism in Iran operates through instrumentarian power, or in other words, using technical means to shape and restrict social behavior (Zuboff 2019).

Central to this analysis is the study of the Woman Life Freedom Movement, which emerged as a powerful challenge to state control in physical spaces and digital domains. Despite sophisticated state surveillance and blocking measures, the movement's strategic use of digital platforms for organization and documentation illustrates networks of outrage and hope because of how social movements adapt and resist through digital means (Castells 2012). The Supreme Council of Cyberspace's response, including implementing the so-called Internet Protection Bill

and the rollout of state-controlled VPNs, represents a belief that social and political challenges can be resolved through technical control measures (Morozov 2011).

This chapter reveals a stark divide between internal and external approaches to resistance, exemplified through ethnographic interviews with Iranian citizens within and outside the country. While some within Iran demonstrate an inside-out resistance through the rejection of external intervention while supporting internal change, members of the diaspora also exhibit this by maintaining hope for change while navigating complex relationships with their homeland (Khosravi 2017; Ghorashi 2023). Gaming platforms emerge as crucial third spaces where political discussion and resistance can occur under cover of recreational activity, revealing how digital communities adapt to and resist surveillance through creative means.

In this chapter on gaming communities, networks, and protest movements, I explore how gamer groups navigate and resist digital authoritarianism. The analysis reveals the technical architecture of control and its social implications, demonstrating how Internet shutdowns and digital surveillance become tools for suppressing dissent and restricting fundamental rights. By examining the intersection of technical infrastructure, social movements, and state control, this chapter contributes to understanding how digital authoritarianism operates in contemporary Iran. It reveals the sophisticated interplay between technical measures and social control while highlighting citizens' resilience and creativity in resisting digital oppression. The findings have Implications for understanding Iran's digital landscape and broader debates about Internet freedom, digital rights, and the future of networked resistance in authoritarian contexts.

As I examine technical infrastructure, social movements, and state control, I provide an analysis of how digital authoritarianism operates in contemporary Iran. I reveal the sophisticated interaction between technical measures and social control while highlighting citizens' resilience

and creativity in resisting digital oppression. My research thus sheds light on Iran's digital landscape and broader debates about Internet freedom, digital rights, and the future of networked resistance in authoritarian contexts. I also examine how the Iranian government's digital control mechanisms, particularly the controversial Internet Protection Bill, represent a sophisticated digital authoritarianism system that uses technical infrastructure as a means of social and political control. By exploring how digital authoritarianism operates through various mechanisms, including Internet shutdowns, platform-specific blocking, and targeted surveillance, I elucidate the influence of information and Internet controls on gamers.

The key takeaways from this chapter include how the Iranian government has deployed a digital iron curtain through systematic Internet shutdowns, targeted platform blocking, and sophisticated surveillance measures, representing a form of networked authoritarianism. The Woman Life Freedom Movement has emerged as a powerful challenge to state control in physical spaces and digital domains, using strategic digital platforms for organization and documentation. The government's response, including implementation of the Internet Protection Bill and the rollout of state-controlled VPNs, represents an attempt to exert greater control over the digital landscape through technological solutionism. Throughout the chapter, I argue that the Iranian government's implementation of digital control mechanisms, such as the Internet Protection Bill, exemplifies a sophisticated form of networked digital authoritarianism that leverages technical infrastructure to suppress social and political freedoms while resistance movements like the Woman Life Freedom Movement adapt and challenge this control through innovative use of digital platforms.

A Hidden War?

Supposedly, there is a "hidden war" on Internet access in Iran (Shakibi 2024). Recent events in Iran continue to show that there has been a continual war on Internet usage since its inception, even if the IRI makes lackluster attempts to obfuscate its modus operandi of soft war (Aryan et al. 2013; Ahmadi 2015; Khiabany 2018; Cohoon 2022). The Iranian government has employed a range of digital authoritarian tactics, using digital technologies to monitor, control, and restrict Internet access. This digital repression is part of a broader strategy of information warfare aimed at maintaining the regime's grip on power.

No law justifies the actions of the Iranian government, but they continue to disrupt Internet access, surveil citizens, and arrest individuals for their online activities. For gamers like Babak, this "hidden war" is not just a theoretical concept but a daily reality. Living alone in a small apartment in Tehran, Babak has created a gaming setup that doubles as a site of resistance. His desk, cluttered with multiple screens and a perpetually running VPN, is a testament to the lengths he must go to access online spaces. "It's like breathing now," he said, laughing. "You don't think about it, you just do it." For Babak, gaming is not just a hobby; it is a lifeline to a world beyond the constraints of the Iranian state.

The challenges are particularly acute for female gamers. Babak recounts the story of his friend Mina, a skilled streamer who uses voice modulation software and a pseudonym to protect her identity. "She's one of the best players I know," he says, "but she can't show her face or use her real voice. The risk is too high right now." Babak touched on one woman gamer's Twitch account going completely offline and being scrubbed in response to the political crackdowns during the 2022 protests. Many others went offline temporarily, fearing potential suppression.

These stories emphasize the resilience and ingenuity of Iranian gamers, who navigate a labyrinth of state-imposed restrictions to maintain their connection to the digital world. In the face of threats of arrest and imprisonment, these strategies—switching between VPNs, streaming under pseudonyms, and mapping Internet disruptions—are acts of everyday resistance that challenge the state's control over digital spaces (Scott 1985; Bayat 2009). The "hidden war" on Internet access in Iran is not just a battle over technology; it is a struggle for agency, identity, and freedom. For individuals like Babak and Mina, gaming is more than a pastime; it is a form of resistance, a way to assert their presence in a world that seeks to silence them.

In November 2019, Mohammad-Javad Azari Jahromi, former Minister of Information and Communications Technology, issued the Internet to be shut down as there was no other alternative to dealing with the mass protests, "Although I was opposed to the Internet shutdown, there was no alternative but to implement it. There is a clause in the law that allows the Supreme National Security Council to decide on an Internet shutdown under crisis conditions" (Dehshiri 2024). The shutdown that Minister Mohammad-Javad Azari Jahromi would later justify as having 'no alternative' was not just a policy decision but a moment that rippled through many people's daily lives. Babak showed me his gaming calendar from that period, marked with black X's spanning weeks. "Look," he pointed, "twenty-one days of nothing. Just darkness." While Jahromi cited Article 176 of the Iranian Constitution and the Supreme National Security Council's authority during "crisis conditions," the reality on the ground told a different story. However, nowhere in the constitution does it suggest that the Supreme National Security Council can shut down the Internet as no law grants it any legitimacy. Yet, despite Jahromi's baseless justifications, the Internet had been shut down based on an extralegal resolution rather than something based on law.

Former President Ebrahim Raisi's instruction to the Minister of Communications to declare that "No one should be annoyed by the Internet" revealed the state's attempt to downplay the significance of these disruptions in January 2024.[42] Babak's response – "Thanks, mate" – carries layers of sarcasm that only those who have lived through the shutdowns can fully appreciate. Babak's community Discord server, which I had been following for my research, was impacted by the shutdowns, creating a digital ghost town during the protests. Messages that happened to get through from the period read like a digital diary of isolation: "Day 7: Still nothing," "Day 15: Using my friend's satellite connection to send this," "Day 20: Miss you all." As Babak and others in the gaming community often discussed, the absence of a legal foundation for these shutdowns seemed less important than their lived impact.

Near his gaming setup is a wall calendar where he tracks gaming sessions and Internet disruptions, creating his "personal archive of digital resistance." Each X marked on the calendar represents not just a day without the Internet but a day of what he terms "digital suffocation" – a visceral reminder of how state control manifests in the most intimate spaces of daily life. His gaming setup resembles a fortified space with multiple VPN connections and backup systems. Each shutdown represents not just a temporary inconvenience but another battle in an ongoing war where the state's weapons are disconnect and denial, while citizens' armor consists of VPNs, proxies, and working with their digital communities.[43] Babak noted while showing me his collection of defunct VPN configurations, "They say there's no war, but look at my casualties" –

[42] Sinaiee, Maryam. "Report Blames President for Internet Censorship in Iran." (June). Iran International. https://www.iranintl.com/en/202401172519. "Public Outcry in Iran as Government Ramps up Internet Disruptions." (May). Iran International. https://www.iranintl.com/en/202405106237.
[43] "Iran: Freedom on the Net 2024 Country Report." 2024. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-net/2024

pointing to a folder of blocked gaming accounts and disconnected streams documenting the very real casualties of this supposedly "hidden conflict."

Babak's experience illustrates the affective entanglements that arise from the clash between a newly imagined digital future and the harsh realities of state-imposed restrictions. The emotional resonance of his story stems from the motivation toward human communication and a desire for normalcy, which gaming communities provide. Much like other gamers worldwide, Babak dreams of upward mobility through online gaming platforms. However, the impact of US economic sanctions and the IRI's censorship laws create additional barriers for Iranian gamers seeking to monetize[44] their in-game labor.[45] Despite Babak's stated desire to play games for fun, his existence, like that of other Iranian gamers, is shaped by the socio-political realities of their context. This produces a sense of digital suffocation and an impulse to use methods of quiet encroachment through bypassing restrictions. In other words, the people will find the means and will fight back, engaging in social non-movements that construct the practice of everyday life as a form of activism (Bayat, 2009). By focusing on Iranian policies that censor the web, this chapter analyzes how the lack of full access to the Internet can be circumnavigated through the everyday experiences, emotions, and affective entanglements of Iranian citizens. The role of agency in the face of censorship and the use of Internet workarounds to access the Internet and

[44] Gamers monetize their skills, content, and influence through their gameplay on Twitch, which provides ad revenue, allows people to subscribe and donate, and sometimes brings in brand sponsorship. Others are competitive eSports players and are able to win cash prizes in competitions. Some even sell in-game items or accounts to others. More experienced gamers often create their own in-game modifications that help with gameplay and then sell that to users. Social media also can play a role, like Instagram or TikTok, in gaining follower recognition, partnerships, or other sponsors. Some gamers even use cryptocurrency and blockchain-based games to earn in-game rewards through pay-to-earn games.

[45] From my field research, gamers in Iran are able to monetize despite sanctions and forced use of domestic Iranian Internet by using VPNs in combination with PayPal, Patreon, and bank transfers. Others can use domestic cash by having donations through Iranian websites. Relying on informal economic means (monetized gaming) as a sole income is risky, and it may be jeopardized should they do any subversive activities or dissent against the government. That is why many streamers do not allow political discourse while streaming live.

play games culminate in social non-movements that challenge the state's control over digital spaces.

The Bill for the Protection of Cyberspace Users

*Digital Ethnography Fieldnotes. August 2021. Late in the night. As I sat cross-legged on my DXRacer computer chair, my eyes strained as they cast over the ever-compassing World Wide Web illuminating from my computer screen. The blue backlight tapped across the back of my computer screen bounced off the white wall, creating a splash of color and downplaying the mundane. I then heard a *ding* on Discord–an instant and voice messaging platform. An Iranian gamer, Babak, had instant messaged me, "Did you see the news last week? The so-called "Protection Bill" will seriously disrupt social network access. Many are about to lose income." Babak touched on a particular set of fears that is too often widespread among Iranians. This fear or traumatic experience was predicated on persistent ruptures of Internet access due to the ever-growing hard-line policy invoked by the Iranian parliament. "Do you see this policy posing challenges to your livelihood? Your ability to play games?" I asked. "Yes, not simply because of the policy, but the continued censorship tactics and Internet blackouts. This has also been very commonplace...I just don't see how I can continue to make money off my Twitch channel." The affective tension of worry, fear, and stress, without having access to the Internet, impacted Babak's psyche. After our brief informal interaction, Babak invited me to watch him play games on the Twitch live gaming platform. The intensity in his body slowly began to ease as I watched him play 5v5 on DOTA 2.*

Babak's gaming space is a critical site of resistance against the Iranian state's digital repression. Gaming on platforms like Twitch allows Babak to temporarily escape the constraints of censorship and surveillance, creating a space where he can assert his agency and maintain a sense of normalcy. Through this process, Babak engaged in a form of quiet encroachment or everyday resistance, subtly or covertly challenging oppressive power structures (Scott 1985; Bayat 2009). Babak's activities provide a form of entertainment and a means of economic survival, as he relies on his Twitch channel for income. This dual function of gaming spaces—as both sites of leisure and resistance—showcases their significance in the broader context of digital politics in Iran. By engaging in gaming, Babak is able to connect with a global community, circumventing the isolation imposed by the Iranian government's Internet policies. This demonstrates the potential of gaming spaces to serve as platforms for individual and collective

resistance. The affective dimensions of Babak's experiences, particularly the "worry, fear, and stress," reflect how he feels toward the Iranian government's censorship tactics and Internet blackouts. These emotions are not merely byproducts of digital repression but are central to understanding how Babak navigates his digital environment.

Babak's affective responses drive his digital practices, such as his reliance on VPNs to maintain access to Twitch and other online platforms. My fieldnotes describe how Babak's "intensity slowly began to ease" as he engaged in gaming, highlighting the therapeutic role of digital spaces in mitigating the emotional toll of repression. This interplay between affect and digital practices underscores the importance of considering emotional dimensions in analyses of digital resistance. Babak's story illustrates how affective experiences are shaped by and shape digital life's material and social conditions under authoritarian regimes. Reflecting on my experience with Babak, I realized it felt like an important scene with material and technological elements shaping digital resistance.

Babak mentioned the "Protection Bill" representing the state's attempt to control this material infrastructure. The threat of losing access to social networks and gaming platforms reveals how digital resistance is fundamentally tied to material conditions and technological access. As Tufekci (2017) argues, digital platforms become sites of contestation where state power and individual resistance intersect through material practices. The mention of Twitch and *DOTA 2* further illustrates how gaming platforms serve as material spaces of resistance. These platforms require specific hardware, software, and Internet infrastructure to function, making them vulnerable to state control and creating opportunities for resistance through technical workarounds and virtual private networks (VPNs).

The IRI's control over citizens' lives in every respect is comprehensive, necessitating multiple institutions that help shut down and filter the net, while keeping citizens in check.[46] As an ongoing effort to further censor and filter the Internet through legislation, the IRI also undermines human rights to freedom of expression and secure online privacy in the name of soft war. As I write this, ongoing developments contour the IRI's attempt to control information. This spans a 3–4-year period, from 2021 to 2024, and is conducted more accurately than previous IRI information controls before this period. In other words, as technology adapts, so does the IRI's strategic calculus of repression.

Through this wrangling over narratives, information spreads from the IRI to the minds of citizens based on whatever dominant issue happens to be on the IRI soft war agenda and the Internet at a nodal point. This is because, since the introduction of the Internet, the IRI has sought to control and monitor its citizens by spreading specific IRI discourse and preventing information from flowing across the net. However, it starts with how the IRI perceives the Internet. The Internet is like architecture. It resembles interconnected computer networks attached to an Internet Protocol Suite that assists communication across networks and devices. However, cyberspace is the commonly used, jargon-ridden IRI term, which invokes taking Internet rights away from citizens.

So, what does cyberspace constitute for the IRI? Cyberspace is an interesting and perhaps outdated term used in the title of the Bill of Protection of Cyberspace Users. Invoking its use in the bill has significant meaning regarding individuals' rights being taken away. Cyberspace can be described as a global symbolic space where the enduring desire to connect, share, and create transforms everyday digital interactions into a lived experience shaped by both individual

[46] See Footnote 75.

aspirations and broader political contexts. This symbolic space includes virtual worlds, messaging, and emails, all of which involve creating lifeworlds for the user. While the Iranian Internet comprises diverse spaces that may not directly reflect an 'Iranian' identity, it carries distinct nuances shaped by the everyday experiences of its citizens and the political decisions of the Iranian government (Cohoon 2022:1). For the IRI, cyberspace control happens to be part of the grand plan to strike against their Western foes and prevent so-called apostasy from happening. In all these attempts to control cyberspace and inculcate the minds of the people through repressive measures, citizens experience IRI accusations and death sentences for not upholding the narrative. Here are some examples to consider:

- Toomaj Salehi was charged with committing *efsad-e fel arz*, meaning corruption on earth, and received a death sentence for rapping against the state. He was awaiting execution since his imprisonment in 2022 until he was finally released in August 2023 on probation. He was still sentenced to death, but that was overturned in June 2024.[47]
- Saleh Mirhashemi Baltaghi was hanged on May 19th, 2023, at age 36, for *moharebe* meaning waging war against God. He was accused of wielding a weapon and colluding in crimes against national security.[48]
- Majid Kazemi was also hanged on May 19th, 2023, at age 30. He had previously experienced 15 mock executions.[49]

[47] "Iran overturns rapper Toomaj Salehi's death sentence for criticizing the government." 2024. The Associated Press.
https://www.npr.org/2024/06/22/nx-s1-5016317/iran-overturns-rapper-toomajs-death-sentence-protests-mahsa-amini
[48] "Iran executes 3 men for waging 'war against God' during protests over Mahsa Amini's death." 2023. CBS News. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/iran-executes-3-protests-mahsa-amini-death/
[49] Khadem, Nassim. 2023. "Majid Kazemi executed after 'torture', his Sydney cousin urges Australia to cut ties with Iran." https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-05-29/majid-kazemi-iran-executions-australian-government-human-rights/102401540

These are just a few of the executions explicitly related to the Woman Life Freedom movement. Iran executed 18 people every week in 2024, including 31 women, which is the highest female execution rate in 17 years.[50]

During the pandemic, the IRI circulated the Bill for the Protection of Cyberspace Users on parliamentary floors. Iranian lawmakers stressed that the parliament's regulations department should pass the "Bill for Protection of Cyberspace Users" in 2021. A draft had made its way outside of Iran in July 2021. Article 19, Miaan's Filterwatch, and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) organizations castigated the idea. CPJ Middle East and North Africa Program Coordinator Sherif Mansour explained that "instead of further controlling what journalists and citizens can do online, Iranian lawmakers should be finding ways to promote the free flow of information."[51] The bill's aims include criminalizing VPNs and hindering international freedom of expression.

Initially, it sought to create a halal or clean Internet to prevent circumvention tools like VPNs. Despite the Internet freedom community campaigns to protect users in Iran, the Raisi administration had been implementing restrictions clandestinely. Under Article 11, government authorities and institutions would access private information through monitoring Iranian users. In contrast, Article 15 would categorize users based on their job description and specify how much Internet access they have, depending on their skill level.[52] The "Protection of Users" bill would

[50] "Iran executes 3 men for waging 'war against God' during protests over Mahsa Amini's death." 2023. CBS News. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/iran-executes-3-protests-mahsa-amini-death/. "Iran executed 18 people every week in 2024, rights group reports." 2024. Iran International. https://www.iranintl.com/en/202412313952. "Iran Executes 31 Women in 2024, Highest in 17 Years." 2025. Iran Wire. https://iranwire.com/en/women/137813-iran-executes-31-women-in-2024-highest-in-17-years/

[51] "Iran's parliament moves forward with a troubling bill to further restrict the Internet." 2021. Committee to Protect Journalists. https://cpj.org/2021/11/iran-parliament-bill-restrict-Internet/

[52] "Islamic Republic of Iran's Law to Support the Family Through Promotion of Culture of Chastity and Hijab." 2024. The Center for Human Rights. https://iranhumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/Hijab-Law-Final-CHRI-Translation.pdf

further regulate and prevent access to online information depending on the level of one's permit issued by the government. Although popular global services and websites like YouTube and Twitter are supposedly not accessible and thus severely restricted, VPNs have been a productive countermeasure against the Iranian government. However, the bill would effectively criminalize the distribution and use of VPNs through imprisonment and block the use of Instagram, resulting in citizens being isolated internationally, further persecuted, and subjected to a hostile online environment.

Former President Ebrahim Raisi and other top officials have talked about creating "legal VPNs" in the case of VPN criminalization (Isfahani 2022). While decision-makers overturned the bill in February 2022, it silently went to the parliamentary floor in early September 2022. While Internet speeds and content access would be deeply impacted, local businesses in Iran that use Instagram as a promotion technique will experience financial deficits, a threat to Iran's booming e-commerce since the onset of COVID-19 (Hashemi 2021). Iranian Internet users continue to experience extensive throttling of Internet speeds, often at random. In February 2023, the "Protection of Users' Rights in Cyberspace and Regulation of Social Messaging Applications" again reached the parliamentary floor. However, according to the Young Journalists Club news agency in Iran, Seyyed Nizamuddin Mousavi, the spokesman of the Majlis Presidium, denied the allegations, stating, "The protection plan has been removed from the agenda of the parliament…Of course, the parliament, in coordination with the Supreme Council of Cyberspace, will approve the necessary laws for cyberspace if needed. If such an event is to happen, as always, any resolution in this field will be done transparently and publicly."[53]

[53] "The protection plan has been removed from the parliament's agenda." 2022. Young Journalists Club. https://www.yjc.ir/fa/news/8356697/%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%AD-%D8%B5%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%AF%D8%B13%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B1-

The Iranian government's efforts to further restrict Internet access and online freedoms through the "Bill for Protection of Cyberspace Users." Often through unorganized ways, individuals and communities resist oppressive power structures (Scott 1985). In the context of the Iranian government's digital policies, citizens' widespread use of VPNs to circumvent Internet restrictions can be seen as a form of everyday resistance. Despite the government's attempts to criminalize VPNs, Iranians continue to find ways to access the global Internet, demonstrating their resilience and refusal to be fully controlled. The Internet bill thusly has the potential to isolate Iranian citizens, subjecting them to a hostile online environment. This can be interpreted as an attempt to manipulate the affective experiences of its citizens, aiming to induce feelings of fear, anxiety, and disempowerment. However, the continued use of VPNs and the community's efforts to protect Internet freedom can be seen as a form of affective resistance, where citizens assert their right to a more open and empowering digital space. The continued efforts of Iranian citizens to circumvent Internet restrictions and maintain their online freedoms can be seen as a form of resistance that challenges the government's attempts to exert total control over the digital landscape. My fieldnotes from May 2024 capture this tension between state control and citizen resistance as the bill resurfaces in parliament.

Digital Ethnography Fieldnotes. May 13, 2024. While working from home on my dissertation, I received a Discord message from Babak and Arman expressing their frustration about the latest developments regarding the Internet Protection Bill. The Bill resurfaced in parliament in May 2024, intending to give control of the Internet's entry and exit gateways in Iran to the military's Telecommunication Infrastructure Company, expedite extensive and extrajudicial surveillance/spying on users at the Internet gateways, and more. The IRI used Article 85 of the constitution to establish precedence and thus will be reviewed by Parliament on May 27, 2024.[54]

%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AC-%D8%B4%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA

[54] Article 85 of the Iranian Constitution allows a parliamentary commission. This manifested as a joint commission of the Protection Bill to review the bill without public debate in the parliamentary assembly. Once the commission has completed its review, the parliament is expected to vote on how long the bill should be implemented

At this time, the joint commission has passed the newly envisioned bill, and it can be passed at any moment on the parliamentary floor. They are ignoring public opinion.

Babak: This ban doesn't change a thing. Unless the entire Internet shuts down permanently, like no way brother…it's just a nuisance.

Arman: Yeah, the Internet was shit, and that's why we need VPNs. Like without a doubt any laws passed mean nothing, and it's like a double-edged sword because we will find a way. Even if access was garbage. Really though, I do not see the point.

Babak: Exactly, download speed, ISP scammers, it runs the gamut. Even if there was a new blow, we will still use VPNs.

The "Bill for Protection of Cyberspace Users," resurfacing in May 2024 highlights the Iranian government's continued efforts to control Internet access and enforce surveillance through the military's Telecommunication Infrastructure Company. This move, enabled by Article 85 of the constitution, has sparked frustration among citizens, as evidenced by the sentiments expressed by Babak and Arman. Babak and Arman articulate their dissatisfaction with the government's attempts to regulate Internet access. They view these measures as ineffective and a mere nuisance, reflecting a broader public sentiment of discontent. Despite the restrictions, both individuals emphasize their ability to adapt using VPNs.

At the same time, the poor quality of Internet services, including slow download speeds and unreliable ISPs, leads to users' frustrations when attempting to access the Internet. Babak and Arman's critiques also show the problems with persistent systemic Internet issues that the

'experimentally' before undergoing a final review by the Guardian Council. According to a legal informant for this research related to the Digital Iran Project: "Article 85 of the Iranian Constitution allows the approval of bills to be delegated to one of the internal commissions if "necessary," with the representatives' approval. However, the law does not define what constitutes this "necessity." The Guardian Council, which interprets the Constitution in Iran, has not yet clarified this concept. As a result, the representatives likely assumed they had the freedom to determine necessity. Legally speaking, Article 85 is meant for situations where a law needs to be implemented 'experimentally' on a trial basis first, so final decisions can be made based on the trial period's results. Also, some legal doctrines believe necessity is only applicable when predicting the outcomes of a law is highly difficult and uncertain. Another interpretation by some legal experts is that necessity applies when the subject of a bill is highly specialized and needs to be reviewed by a commission with relevant expertise. However, neither of these conditions applied to the Protection Bill, and its approval under Article 85 faced significant criticism."

government does not address within its digital infrastructure. Overall, Babak and Arman were very reflective when diving into their experiences because the ban represented a nuisance that failed to achieve its intended purpose. Arman specifically came across as pragmatic and critical, emphasizing the poor state of Internet access while also holding on to a sense of community resilience and determination to find alternative solutions. Unlike Babak and Arman, supporters often refer to the bill as the "Bill to Support Users' Rights" or the "Bill for Regulation of Radio Communications." Although the Protection Bill was scheduled for discussion during the last days of the eleventh parliamentary term and was even read on the agenda on Tuesday, May 21, 2024, the last working day of the eleventh parliament, it was not discussed in that session. A Special Commission for the Protection Bill member stated, "All bills that the parliament has not started reviewing, or whose review has remained incomplete, will not be transferred to the next term and are considered null" (Seyedreza 2024).[55]

The bill is thus not just legislation but a tool in what Shakibi (2024) identifies as an ongoing hidden war between the state's desire for control and citizens' fight for digital freedom. Despite the Supreme Council of Cyberspace's attempt to frame it as the "Bill to Support Users' Rights," it represents a continuation of the regime's long-term strategy of digital control and repression. At the same time, citizens continue to resist through everyday acts of digital defiance. This "networked authoritarianism" gives control of Internet gateways to the military's Telecommunication Infrastructure Company and thus enables systematic surveillance and monitoring of citizens' online activities (Morozov 2011). Extensive surveillance and control through mechanisms like the Internet Bill have become part of the broader information warfare or *jang-e narm*, even though Babak and others saw it as "just a nuisance."

[55] See Footnote 54 on explanation of the bill's commission.

#MahsaAmini, Operation Hard War: Target the Internet

The death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022 catalyzed a networked movement, but one that quickly had to adapt to extreme digital repression (Tufekci 2017). In response, governments worldwide intensified their measures against dissent, with many employing drastic technological controls over digital communication. Iran's Internet shutdowns in 2023 were part of a global trend of 283 shutdowns across 39 countries.[56] Yet, Iran's case stands out for both its intensity and the sophisticated resistance it engendered ("The most violent year: Internet shutdowns in 2023" 2024). Drawing on Bayat's (2009) concept of quiet encroachment and Sreberny's (2010) analysis of Iranian digital culture, the *dahe-ye hashtadi-ha* (Generation Z) developed adaptive digital resistance that operated in ways to survive. While conducting this research, I found a relative silence from some Iranian gamers during Internet shutdowns to show a profound intersection of state control, digital absence, and resistance. This silence, or what I felt to be an "internal alarm" of worry, encapsulates the broader dynamics of Iran's soft war tactics and the resilience of digital communities. As I reached out during the early moments of the Internet shutdown in September 2022, I look back and see the role of gaming communities within the context of the Woman Life Freedom movement as critical nodes of resistance. My ethnographic fieldnotes captured this evolution in the following vignettes and analyses.

Digital Ethnography Fieldnotes. September 16, 2022. Babak messaged me on Discord. I was not at my desk at the time. He said, "I just saw a woman get illegally arrested as I was driving near Argentina Square. They shoved her in a black vehicle. Who knows what happened to her?!"

When Babak witnessed an arrest near Argentina Square on September 16, 2022, his immediate instinct was to document and share: "I just saw a woman get illegally arrested as I was driving near Argentina Square. They shoved her in a black vehicle." As Akhavan (2013)

[56] Rosson, Zach, Anthonio, Felicia, and Tacket, Carolyn. 2024. "The most violent year: Internet shutdowns in 2023." Access Now. https://www.accessnow.org/Internet-shutdowns-2023/

notes, this act of digital witnessing represents a form of resistance through documentation. However, as Michaelsen (2018) argues, such acts of digital resistance carry increasing risks under authoritarian surveillance. The sophistication of this surveillance apparatus is well-documented by scholars like Aryan et al. (2013), who detail the technical infrastructure of Iran's digital control. However, my fieldwork reveals how Generation Z developed censorship countermeasures. As Azar explained on September 28, 2022: "I literally am changing my methods every hour so I can stay connected to avoid intranet and mass filtering later in the day." This constant adaptation exemplifies spatial resistance and networked dissent but with a distinctly Iranian character (Lilja 2022: 310). Iranian gamers have been at the forefront of developing technical workarounds to state control. My ethnographic work with gamers like Babak reveals how gaming communities became incubators for resistance strategies, developing counter-surveillance practices. These practices, ranging from VPN management to encrypted communication channels, represent an ordinary technical resistance. Still, with a crucial difference: they are embedded in existing social networks and cultural practices.

Digital Ethnography Fieldnotes. September 17, 2022. I just read about citizens gathering at Kasra hospital after Mahsa Jina Amini's death. I message Mariam on Discord about what's happening in Iran. Within seconds, Mariam says, "They are in denial about Mahsa's death. The Morality Police killed her with no remorse! Not a single person deserves such a death." Mariam's tone expresses extreme worry, sadness, and discontent. It seems like there is a larger concern looming, but perhaps I am projecting. But then she had to go without much explanation to a local protest near the Saqqez region, and I then tell her, "Please keep in touch and stay safe." She replies, "Of course, Mindy jan. I will avoid any so-called police."

Mariam's response encapsulates a profound critique of the state's repressive apparatus, foregrounding how digital surveillance and physical state violence are mutually reinforcing elements of Iran's governance. Mariam's response to Amini's death – "They are in denial about

Mahsa's death. The Morality Police killed her with no remorse!" – reflects the intersection of digital and bodily control in Iran's system of governance. She reveals the role of the state in mediating and controlling both physical bodies and the digital space. By blaming the Morality Police, Mariam not only indicts a coercive apparatus that directly governs citizens' behavior in public but also highlights how the digital realm is implicated in this struggle. The state's efforts to shape narratives through censorship, selective information dissemination, and propaganda effectively obscure the reality of bodily harm, while its physical measures of repression—such as the use of force by the Morality Police—reinforce an environment where openly questioning state power comes at great personal risk.

Digital Ethnography Fieldnotes. September 27, 2022. News across the globe shows dahe-ye hashtadi-ha (Generation Z) filling the streets of Tehran. I reach out to Azar asking how things are going, how is your family, and if we could chat when she gets a chance. No response. I think Discord has been blocked.

Digital Ethnography Fieldnotes. September 28, 2022. Azar messages me. "It is comical...this regime. They will kill people just for walking by, they will ignore the myriad of messages that inspire us, but if you catch enough following, you're screwed. I literally am changing my methods every hour so I can stay connected to avoid intranet and mass filtering later in the day. But we have been experiencing a shutdown."

The Iranian state's deliberate cultivation of uncertainty through Internet shutdowns represents a form of digital precarity. The state's ability to disrupt digital connections transforms routine disconnection into a tool of psychological warfare. The fear of "mass arrest and execution" among gamers, coupled with accusations of "insulting leadership" or "apostasy," underscores how digital absence becomes politically charged. For instance, Azar, a young gamer, described her experience during a shutdown: "I literally am changing my methods every hour so I can stay connected." This constant adaptation highlights the exhausting nature of digital

precarity, where individuals must expend significant emotional and technical effort to maintain their digital presence. Azar's experience underscores the psychological toll of navigating a landscape where disconnection is both a technical and political threat.

Digital Ethnography Fieldnotes. October 1, 2022. The dahe-ye hashtadi-ha continue to gather in the streets of Tehran to protest the death of Mahsa Amini. I message Mariam, Azar, Babak, Arman, and others on Discord. No response. I think the Internet has been shut down.

The protests following Amini's death revealed both the power and limitations of these resistance strategies. When my messages to Mariam, Azar, Babak, and Arman went unanswered on October 1, 2022, it demonstrated the vulnerability of networked movements to state intervention. However, Generation Z activists have developed remarkable resilience in the face of digital repression. This resilience is reflected in a digital adaptation cycle – a pattern observed throughout my fieldwork where each new form of state control is met with innovative circumvention strategies. While exhausting for participants, this cycle has created a resistance infrastructure – a combination of technical skills, social networks, and cultural practices that enable sustained opposition to digital authoritarianism (Buck & Schmidt 2022).

When the Iranian gamers I had been engaging with did not respond, an internal alarm rang, screaming, "worry." Many of them previously expressed their fear of mass arrest and execution, their distrust for the government, and anxiety around the possibility of apostasy against the Islamic Republic by allegedly insulting leadership. While these aspects of fear and determination toward a better life will be discussed further in this chapter and others, especially in relation to inner lifeworlds, I would like to first turn to the main premise: the relationship between soft war, Internet shutdown, and the Woman Life Freedom movement.

The act of maintaining a digital presence in the face of state repression becomes an act of defiance. Every online interaction carries political weight as individuals navigate the risks of

surveillance and censorship, thereby necessitating community-building habits. The blocking of gaming community sites and platforms during the Woman Life Freedom movement shows how fearful the state is of digital platforms as sites of political mobilization. With intermittent Internet use, however, gaming communities found a way to use those moments. For example, during a particularly intense period of protests, Mariam recounted how her gaming group organized a virtual vigil for Mahsa Amini: "We couldn't go out, but we could still come together online. It was our way of showing solidarity and keeping her memory alive." This virtual act of resistance demonstrates how digital presence can transcend physical limitations, turning gaming platforms into collective mourning and activism spaces.

Citizen targeting happens in multivariate socio-material ways, from e-commerce to violence and discrimination. This can correlate to the IRI's so-called soft war practices, which is a misnomer because it is also linked to physical harm and killing (hard war), fostering more political distrust and upheaval. Soft war tactics supposedly address issues with outsiders undermining a state, and the censorship policies are supposed to reflect that. The IRI's implementation of so-called "soft war" tactics represents a sophisticated fusion of digital and physical control mechanisms that extends far beyond traditional censorship practices. As Morozov (2011) argues in "The Net Delusion," authoritarian regimes have evolved to weaponize digital technologies against their own populations, a phenomenon particularly evident in Iran's approach to digital control. The technical architecture of suppression, or "networked authoritarianism," operates through a complex array of mechanisms: BGP manipulation for

Internet throttling,[57] deep packet inspection (DPI) for content filtering,[58] and strategic deployment of cellular network disruptions (MacKinnon 2011). These technical measures, however, represent only one facet of a broader socio-material targeting system that encompasses economic, social, and physical dimensions of control. Consequently, gaming communities have emerged as critical sites of resistance, transforming leisure spaces into the politics of small things (Goldfarb 2007; Bayat 2009).

The militarization of digital control in Iran has created a paradoxical situation where attempts to suppress digital resistance have instead fostered more sophisticated forms of circumvention and community resilience (Jones 2022). This is particularly evident in gaming communities, where networks of outrage and hope provide a lifeline across digital platforms that ultimately foster resistance and solidarity. The technical suppression mechanisms, from DNS poisoning to VPN detection, have inadvertently catalyzed the development of these small media resistance networks. These networks, operating through gaming platforms and other digital spaces, demonstrate how authoritarian Internet control often generates unexpected forms of resistance. The integration of military and surveillance systems with civilian digital infrastructure has led to digital authoritarianism, where the distinction between soft and hard war becomes increasingly blurred, as evidenced by the coordination between Internet shutdowns and physical violence against protesters (Jones 2022).

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[57] The Internet is like a giant map with roads connecting different cities. These "roads" are managed by a system called BGP (Border Gateway Protocol), which decides the best path for your data to travel. If someone manipulates BGP, they can intentionally make your data take a slower or longer route, like forcing you to take a detour on a highway. This slows down your Internet, which is called throttling.

[58] Imagine sending a letter in an envelope. Normally, the post office just delivers it without opening it. But with DPI, it's like someone opening your envelope, reading your letter, and deciding whether to deliver it or block it based on the content. This is how governments or companies can filter or block certain websites, videos, or messages.

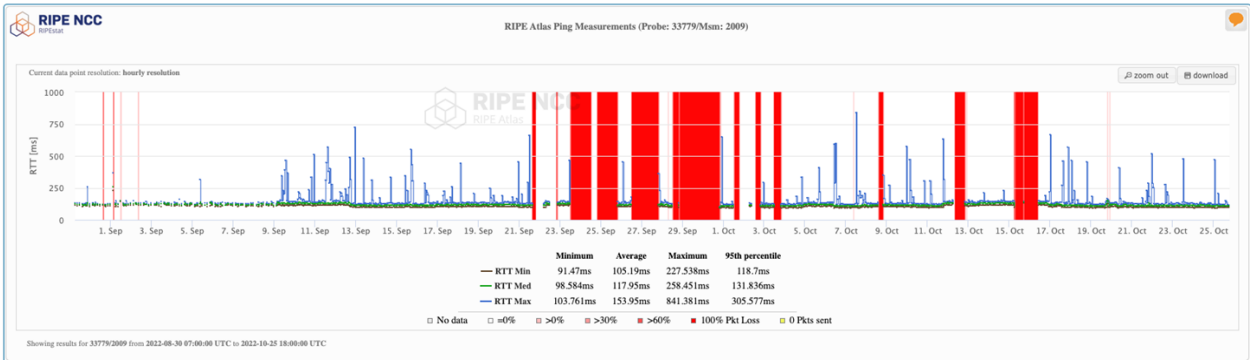

Figure 2.1: Ping measurements taken from OONI.org using RIPE Atlas. Red blocks mean that the Ipv6 address cannot be found.[59]

As seen in Figure 2.1, red blocks indicate periods of 100% packet loss, meaning no data was successfully transmitted during these times. It also indicates that Ipv6[60] addresses were inaccessible during these periods. In addition to the lack of Internet accessibility, the red blocks coincide with known protest dates, suggesting deliberate Internet shutdowns to suppress communication and coordination among citizens. The disruptions are intermittent but strategically timed, likely to coincide with key protest events. They also reflect the same dates I attempted to communicate with my participants.

[59] See: https://ooni.org/post/2022-iran-technical-multistakeholder-report/images/10.png

[60] Think of IP addresses like phone numbers for devices on the Internet. The old system (IPv4) used shorter numbers, like having only 7-digit phone numbers. As more devices connected to the Internet, we started running out of these numbers - just like how cities need to add area codes when they run out of phone numbers. Think of IPv6 as giving every grain of sand on Earth its own unique address. This is how many addresses it can handle! This means every device, from your phone to your smart fridge, can have its own unique address on the Internet. (Sami n.d.).

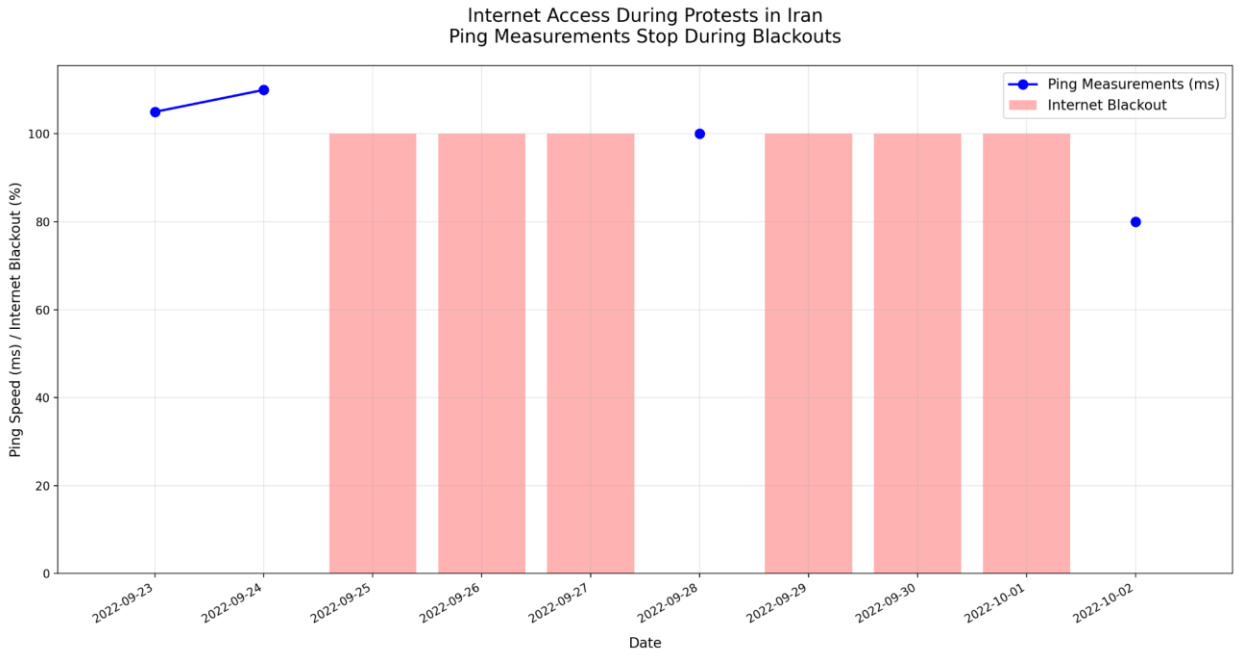

Figure 2.2. Ping measurements based on blackouts based on OONI.org Figure 1 visualization.[61]

Figure 2.2's blue line with dots marks ping measurements, representing the Internet connection speed. The higher the line, the slower the connection. The pink bars represent total blackout, just like the red bars in Figure 1. This systematic implementation of Internet shutdowns in Iran is one aspect of Iran's digital authoritarian control over the public sphere (MacKinnon 2011). This is evidenced in the empirical data showing clustered Internet outages lasting 2-3 days at a time, where ping measurements reveal deliberate patterns of digital control. As visualized in the data, these shutdowns manifest as periods of significantly degraded connection speeds, with ping measurements spiking during critical moments of civil unrest. The ping measurements, represented by blue dots in the visualization, demonstrate technical disruption and an ability to modify behavior through control of digital infrastructure rather than seeking to

[61] I used Python to create the visualization, leveraging libraries like Matplotlib for plotting and Pandas for data handling so that I could provide more clarity to the data.

harm a person physically. However, ping and shutdowns also indicate political suppression and likely violence to those protesting on the street. During these periods, connection speeds were deliberately manipulated, initiating a surveillance culture where digital control became normalized. The magnitude of these shutdowns, particularly evident in the correlation between protest activities and Internet disruptions, shows how authorities strategically engulfed both physical and digital spaces, implementing both digital and physical enforcement – using technology to suppress dissent and prevent the documentation of state violence.

The magnitude of Internet shutdowns sought to disrupt citizen upheaval while authorities flooded the streets to cull the protests and prevent incriminating evidence on cell phones. Neither of these methods proved successful on the authorities' part. It is vital to understand that these methods are not new; they may temporarily thwart protestors but are not wholly preventive, leading to the same cat-and-mouse chase since the early 2000s. For example, Facebook became extremely popular in Iran in unparalleled ways, and the IRI ultimately filtered the platform in 2009 to curb the support of protestors against the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Thereafter, the IRI blocked Twitter due to fear of protestors organizing. These bans only spurred Iranians to devise creative ways to circumnavigate these challenges, such as VPNs. Because VPNs allow users to access the Internet by disguising their online identities and cloaking an individual's online location, Iranians could re-access Facebook and other social media. Then, these users could network, essentially disrupting the lack of access to create a lifeline to the worldwide Internet. To put it more simply, to the IRI's dismay, much more information from citizens was able to get out of the country despite these onerous attempts to completely cut off access to the outside world.

As long as the Internet exists in Iran, citizens will find a way to have an Internet connection. Despite the fact that much of the citizen population can stymie human rights violations, the IRI is still motivated to control the Internet through financial gain and facilitate surveillance and censorship practices, especially seen throughout the Woman Life Freedom protests. These censorship practices were initially put onto paper for passing in February 2022. Lawmakers sought to pass the "Bill for Protection of Cyberspace Users" to give Iranian government authorities access to the private information of Iranian citizens and extend bans over more online platforms in addition to criminalizing VPNs. The IRGC hoped to dole out its government-sanctioned VPNs, essentially saying that the user will be monitored (Rubin 2024).

After the bill was silently implemented in early September 2022, it fell under the control of the National Information Network– a multibillion-dollar project that notoriously works with several state agencies in Iran, such as the Basij militia and Iranian Cyber Police, to monitor citizens, implement violence, and conduct global cyberattacks (Cohoon 2022). Because the soft war agenda has been in part to prevent the flow of incoming ideas from the West and to control media through propaganda in Iran, the government's infrastructure will seek to segregate access to the global Internet, allowing and forbidding user access based on occupation, age, and other factors ultimately with government-backed VPNs. Government-backed VPNs will benefit the IRI because they will cost the user money, ultimately allowing the government additional surveillance opportunities. As this legal VPN framework continues to materialize online, in concert with the militias and the morality police, the government will then continue to reject democracy and specifically block information from getting in and out of Iran, albeit unsuccessfully and at the risk of continual decline of political trust among citizens. Since the beginning of the protests, access to the Internet was and has only been further exacerbated by the

Iranian government, even if citizens find ways to access it. The protests, with merit, explicitly emphasize regime change and the right for women to choose how to live freely. In late October, I talked with Azar through Discord messaging about the issue of human rights and the ability to live as she wanted.

Azar: My friends and I couldn't play DOTA 2, Clash of Clans or chat in Discord. I just want to play and live my life.

Me: Do you think large-scale attacks against citizens are inevitably an attack towards citizens as Internet users?

Azar: First and foremost, Woman Life Freedom is about women's freedom to choose, about human rights of everyone, and so, Internet shutdown is systemic to this. The government is afraid, and cowards for using guns and tanks. We have nothing but our voices and stones.

Me: What do you think they are afraid of? Can you elaborate on the systemic issue here?

Azar: They are afraid of change, us talking to each other…. Chat section is used for sharing information and images. So, taking that away is a way to make our lives more unbearable, to strip our rights down even further.

Citizens like Azar reveal what Howard and Hussain (2013) describe as "digital resistance" emerging in response to state control. Despite the government's attempts to implement a National Information Network and criminalize VPN usage, citizens developed sophisticated circumvention strategies (Howard & Hussain 2013). The temporal patterns of Internet disruption are visible in the ping measurement data. The government's strategic timing of shutdowns – clustering them in 2-3 day periods – suggests a calculated approach to information control that Deibert & Rohozinski (2010) identify as characteristic of modern digital authoritarianism. My conversation with Azar and the Internet shutdown data invoke what it means to be part of a surveillance culture in authoritarian contexts. The data reveals technical

disruption, and the creation of information vacuums designed to fragment social movements and prevent the documentation of state violence.

Additionally, through conversations with my participants, what arises is exactly how gamers use these platforms not merely for entertainment but as crucial third spaces[62] for social connection and identity formation. Online and 3D environments are important to some because they offer a place to socialize, wherein socializing in other spaces may be impossible, especially in Iran, where men and women cannot show intimacy in public. When the government shut down Internet access across 80 cities in late September 2022, it specifically targeted these gaming and communication platforms, recognizing their potential for fostering resistance and solidarity. In this way, digital platforms become sites of contestation between state control and citizen resistance (Tufekci 2017). The IRI's "Seventh Development Plan" represents a technological solutionism where the belief that social and political problems can be solved through technical control.

While protests galvanized the IRI to further restrict Internet access, from throttling to shutdowns, the IRI's modus operandi has been and continues to be Internet tiering.[63] The IRI's Seventh Development Plan is rolling out a reduction of international bandwidth and encouraging users to use local services with its fiber optics rollout as part of the censorship system and tiering rollout.[64] The Cyber Police's role in purging websites and monitoring influential users, including

[62] A third space or third place offers sociability in public settings outside of work and home and are essential to "happily anticipated gatherings of individuals" (Ducheneaut et al. 2007).
[63] Through NIN, various authorities desire to control specific groups access to international Internet, while forcing the rest of the population to domestic network known as the intranet. This is documented by Freedom House. "Iran: Freedom on the Net 2024 Country Report." 2024. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-net/2024
[64] Government officials and greenlit professionals have access to faster Internet speeds, while the general public, students, and those with less education have lower Internet speeds. See: "Freedom on the Net 2024: Iran" from Freedom House and "National Network and Silence on Censorship: A Profile of the New Telecommunications Minister" from Filterwatch.

gamers and scholars, demonstrates an extreme form of alienation through digital alienation – using technology to suppress political dissent systematically (Fuchs 2023: 284). The Internet suffers from co-optation and colonization by those who hold power. The Cyber Police essentially assisted in purging websites and social media, specifically identifying influential users, scholars, gamers, etc., to monitor and clean cyberspace.[65] The data reveals technical disruption and the creation of information vacuums designed to fragment social movements and prevent the documentation of state violence, showing how digital networks become central to modern power struggles (Castells 2012).

Conclusion

The Iranian government's implementation of digital control mechanisms, particularly during the Woman Life Freedom Movement, reveals the evolving sophistication of modern digital authoritarianism. As demonstrated through this chapter's analysis of Internet shutdowns, platform-specific blocking, and surveillance measures, the state's approach extends beyond mere technical restrictions. Rather, the state employs a comprehensive system of social control that operates through digital infrastructure. At the same time, dissent occurs through websites that the government ends up flagging (MacKinnon 2011: 33). The targeting of specific communities, particularly gamers and scholars, alongside the implementation of the Internet Protection Bill, illustrates how digital control has become increasingly granular and strategic, aimed at fragmenting social connections and preventing the documentation of state violence. The

[65] "More than 5 thousand criminal contents were removed from cyberspace." 2022. IRNA. https://www.irna.ir/news/85041249/%D9%BE%D9%86%D8%AC-%D9%87%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%87-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%81%D8%B6%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B2%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%B3%D9%88%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D9%82%D8%B2%D9%88%DB%8C%D9%86-%D8%AD%D8%B0%D9%81

implications of these findings extend beyond Iran's borders, contributing to our understanding of how digital authoritarianism operates in contemporary contexts.

The Woman Life Freedom Movement's resistance strategies, including the creative use of VPNs and alternative communication platforms, demonstrate the persistent capacity for networked resistance even under sophisticated systems of control (Castells, 2012). However, the government's response – implementing state-controlled VPNs, reducing international bandwidth, and encouraging local service usage through the "Seventh Development Plan" – suggests an evolution in how authoritarian states approach digital control, moving from broad restrictions to more nuanced forms of digital sovereignty and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019). These developments have significant implications for understanding the future of digital rights and Internet freedom globally. As authoritarian states refine their approaches to digital control, the experiences of Iranian citizens, particularly their strategies of resistance and adaptation, provide crucial insights into the ongoing struggle between state control and digital rights. The findings suggest that effective resistance to digital authoritarianism requires technical solutions and the cultivation of resilient social networks and international solidarity. Future research must continue to examine how these dynamics evolve, particularly as states develop more sophisticated digital control tools and citizens devise new strategies of resistance.

Chapter 3

Citizen Resistance vs The IRI's Soft War Tactics: From VPNs to Memeing the State

Introduction

This chapter explores quiet encroachment, the innovative and nonconfrontational actions employed by Iranian citizens to counteract the Islamic Republic of Iran's (IRI) soft war agenda. In the case of Iranian gamers, quiet encroachment is the circulation of memes and the use of VPNs as an active response. These tactics allow Iranian gamers to challenge state narratives and authority from a position of relative safety and anonymity. By examining these methods, the chapter highlights how citizens creatively push back against the IRI's efforts to control information and suppress dissent through measures like the Internet Bill and broader censorship strategies. Memes, in particular, become a way for any Iranian citizen to cope with the realities of digital authoritarianism while also actively subverting the government's propaganda and control mechanisms. For this chapter, I focus on the spread of Woman Life Freedom popular memes, and in some cases, memes made by Iranian gamers. The chapter also situates these citizen-led initiatives within the broader context of digital authoritarianism, where the state employs sophisticated tools to monitor, restrict, and manipulate online spaces. Nevertheless, as this analysis reveals, Iranian citizens have developed equally sophisticated countermeasures, transforming everyday digital tools into platforms for resistance. The chapter argues that Iranian citizens deploy tactics as a strategic form of nonviolent resistance against the Islamic Republic of Iran's (IRI) digital control measures and soft war tactics.

Everyday digital practices like VPN usage, meme creation, and gaming community interactions, or forms of resistance, are particularly significant in the context of the IRI's increasing digital authoritarianism, as exemplified by the Internet Protection Bill and the Seventh

Development Plan (2024-2031). These individual, non-collective acts of digital resistance constitute a significant form of political pushback, even without organized revolutionary action. Nonviolent tactics represent a new form of resistance adapted to digital authoritarianism. From using VPNs to bypass Internet restrictions to creating and disseminating politically charged memes, these actions represent a form of everyday resistance that challenges the state's narrative and control. This chapter sheds light on the interplay between state control and citizen resistance in Iran's digital landscape through ethnographic insights, digital analysis, and theoretical frameworks. In the face of systemic oppression, acts of nonconfrontation not only undermine the IRI's soft war tactics but also serve as a testament to the resilience and ingenuity of Iranian citizens. By examining these dynamics, the chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of how digital tools and cultural practices intersect in the struggle for freedom and self-expression in authoritarian contexts.

Meanwhile, the IRI's soft war entails actual policy that seeks to curtail the use of countermeasures beneficial to movements among citizens. The overarching premise of soft war is to invoke soft power through media propaganda to influence others through shaping preferences and persuasion rather than coercion or force. It involves using cultural, ideological, and institutional influence to shape the preferences of others in a way that leads them to accept the influencing country's objectives voluntarily. The prime example for this chapter is the use of circumvention tactics as a method of soft power. In other words, the Iranian gaming community becomes a nodal point through which individual gamers enact soft resistance by using circumvention tactics. The centrality of the political aspects of gaming is constructed based on emotional and social appeal towards playing games rather than revolutionary overthrow. Another aspect of quiet encroachment is humor for gamers. Whether using a VPN or spreading memes,

their hope for liberation from a rogue state unites their ideas, even though there is no collective gamer movement that seeks a regime change in the IRI. In other words, gamer groups are not necessarily meeting with guildmates to protest collectively; rather, the collective and conscious effort is among Iranian citizens. The efforts of gamers are, therefore, best described as dispersed. Gamers in this study realize that the geopolitical status of the Iranian government proves to be one of great conflict with Israel and Saudi Arabia, or rather, the US allies in the region that seek to enact the world order. But even so, the IRI is not a popular governmental model among *dahe-ye hashtadi-ha* nor millennials because of a lack of economic security and happiness due in large part to state surveillance, censorship, and violent crackdowns.

The complex dynamics of digital resistance and regime perspectives in Iran reveal a stark divide between internal and external approaches to change while emphasizing the sophisticated interplay between surveillance and counter-surveillance strategies. Through interviews conducted on Discord throughout April 2023, my interlocutors reveal nuanced perspectives that challenge simplistic narratives about regime change and digital resistance:

Javad: Look, I am just not interested in having outsiders overthrow the government. That's traitorous. But we in Iran should change Iran.

Bahar: We are hostage to a terrible and repressive government. The economic situation feels hijacked. I hope for regime change.

Whereas those outside of the country note:
Asma: Even with despairing paranoia and some with their conspiracies towards the regime, we have hope for a better future.

Kayvan: Well, in LA we do not love the regime. We are proud of our Persian heritage. I support an H1-b visa for those who want to immigrate since I do not see regime change happening anytime soon.

Iranian citizens have developed sophisticated forms of digital resistance in response to these restrictions. Through ethnographic interviews conducted on Discord throughout April 2023, participants revealed nuanced perspectives on regime change and digital resistance. As one participant, Javad, stated: “Look, I am just not interested in having outsiders overthrow the government. That’s traitorous. But we in Iran should change Iran.” This sentiment reflects a broader pattern of internal resistance that prioritizes domestic agency over external intervention. The gaming community emerges as a particularly significant node of resistance. These spaces serve not only as recreational platforms but also as venues for political discussion and cultural resistance.

The perspective from the Iranian diaspora adds complexity to this narrative. As Asma noted, “Even with despairing paranoia, and some with their conspiracies towards the regime, we have hope for a better future.” This hope, combined with practical approaches to resistance, characterizes the diaspora’s contribution to digital soft tactics. Kayvan, based in Los Angeles, emphasizes cultural preservation alongside practical solutions: “Well, in LA we do not love the regime, we are proud of our Persian heritage. I support an H1-b visa for those who want to immigrate since I do not see regime change happening anytime soon.”

Meanwhile, Bahar’s observation that “We are hostage to a terrible and repressive government. The economic situation feels hijacked” exemplifies how economic and digital repression become intertwined tools of state control. The diaspora perspective offers a different dimension of resistance. Asma’s reflection that, despite challenges, there is “hope for a better future” embodies complex mixture of hope and skepticism shaped by distance from the regime. This contrasts with Kayvan’s more pragmatic approach in Los Angeles, focusing on immigration pathways rather than revolutionary change.

The effectiveness of Iranian nonconfrontational tactics against what participants describe as a rogue surveillance state must be understood through these varied perspectives. From my perspective, gaming platforms have truly emerged as third spaces. These spaces become particularly significant in the context of what Morozov (2011) describes as digital authoritarianism, where state surveillance attempts to penetrate every aspect of online life. The tactics employed by gamers facing censorship, both within and outside Iran, reveal sophisticated forms of resistance. Inside Iran, gamers develop digital enclosure strategies to create protected spaces within surveilled networks. The diaspora community, meanwhile, leverages its position to provide technical support and maintain cultural connections, demonstrating how gaming communities can function as resistance networks while developing platform-specific circumvention strategies. So, what is the effectiveness of Iranian digital tactics against a rogue surveillance state? What are these gamers' tactics against censorship in and outside of Iran? Firstly, taking an even deeper look into the IRI's soft war political theatre is imperative.

From Internet Bill to the Seventh Development Plan: A Soft War on Access Continues

The IRI's policy of soft war and its geopolitical soft power in the region is prominent when further analyzing the Internet Bill's reach during the Woman Life Freedom protests and comparing that to an apparently positive socio-economic endeavor like the Seventh Development Plan. The Internet Bill was drawn up in 2014 and came to fruition in September 2022 under Mohammad Javad Azari Jahromi, the Minister of Information and Communications Technology. While parts were silently passed right before the Woman Life Freedom protests, the Supreme Council of Cyberspace and Head of the National Cyberspace Center announced Resolution No. 3

of the 96th session, thereby banning VPNs by all users on March 1, 2024, explicitly handing control of Internet gateways to the armed forces, and criminalizing VPN use.[66] At face value, the Internet Bill seems to have positive potential as it deals with cybersecurity threats, but it instead threatens the citizens' rights to Internet access. It infringes upon individuals' freedom of expression. Additionally, the Internet Bill silently ushered in Internet tiering: who has access to what based on education and strict monitoring of any access.

The Seventh Development Plan of Iran (2024-2031) represents a strategic framework that integrates soft and hidden war doctrines into the nation's digital and technological policies. The strategic objectives were approved during the 84th meeting of the Supreme Council of Cyberspace chaired by former President Ebrahim Raisi in August 2022 and currently is being supported by President Masoud Pezeshkian during 2024 onward. This includes implementing a domestic browser, the domestic operating system for mobile phones, domestic email service, a domestic search engine, tariffing to access services and content while providing basic service of the National Internet Network (NIN) at a competitive global rate, and mandatory user identification (Shakibi 2024). As a strategy, soft war emphasizes the use of cultural, informational, and technological tools to influence and control public opinion. The Seventh Development Plan reflects this strategy by focusing on NIN and tiered Internet access. Ultimately, the IRI seeks to collect all information about citizens, which is made possible

[66] "The use of filter breakers in Iran was officially banned after approval from the Leader of the Islamic Republic." 2024. Radio Farda. https://www.radiofarda.com/amp/iran-announce-vpn-illegal-Internet-khamenei/32827817.html. "Resolution of the Supreme Cyberspace Council on Combating Filter Violators." 2024. Dadbazar. https://www.ekhtebar.ir/%d9%85%d8%b5%d9%88%d8%a8%d9%87-%d8%b4%d9%88%d8%b1%d8%a7%db%8c-%d8%b9%d8%a7%d9%84%db%8c-%d9%81%d8%b6%d8%a7%db%8c-%d9%85%d8%ac%d8%a7%d8%b2%db%8c-%d8%af%d8%b1%d8%ae%d8%b5%d9%88%d8%b5-%d9%85%d9%82%d8%a7/. "Tightening the Net: Iran's New phase of digital repression." (2024). Article 19. https://www.article19.org/resources/tightening-the-net-irans-new-phase-of-digital-repression/

through several governing bodies: the "Ministry of Culture, IRIB, Statistical Center, and part of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, as well as private sector entities such as ride-sharing apps, payment service providers, navigation apps, and generally any private application capable of recording data on users' daily behaviors" (2024).

By creating a controlled digital environment, the plan aims to reduce reliance on global Internet infrastructure and ensure that information flows align with state interests. Content filtering, monitoring systems, and licensed VPN distribution further reinforce the state's ability to shape public discourse and maintain ideological control. By leveraging these concepts, the plan seeks to enhance Iran's digital sovereignty, fortify its cyber defenses, and maintain control over its population. This chapter explores how the plan operationalizes these doctrines through its key components, including digital infrastructure development, control mechanisms, surveillance infrastructure, economic integration, and security measures. Iran's digital control measures, like the Seventh Development Plan, share similarities with strategies employed by other authoritarian regimes.

For instance, China's Great Firewall represents one of the most sophisticated Internet censorship and surveillance systems, combining technical measures with legal and institutional frameworks to control online spaces. The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) also regulates Internet and censorship and answers to the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission under the authority of President Xi Jinping. CAC has established several other branches. The state also works with tech companies to retrieve citizen data on social media behaviors (Qiang 2021). Like Iran, China employs state-controlled VPNs and heavily monitors online activity, but it also integrates advanced AI technologies to identify and suppress dissent preemptively. In Russia, the "Sovereign Internet" law mirrors Iran's emphasis on digital sovereignty, aiming to

create a self-contained Internet infrastructure that can operate independently of global networks. This is made possible through Internet service providers installing equipment to block all banned content and reroute Internet traffic back to the domestic Internet. At the same time, another law passed in 2018 fines users for the use of VPNs or proxies.[67] While technically ambitious, this approach has faced significant implementation challenges across all states, particularly in balancing control with functionality.

Similarly, Iran's efforts to promote state-controlled platforms often struggle to gain user trust and adoption as citizens continue to rely on circumvention tools to access global platforms. These comparisons make it clear that there are unique and common aspects of digital authoritarianism between Russia, China, and Iran. While the technical and legal frameworks may differ, the underlying goal of controlling information and suppressing dissent remains consistent across these contexts. The resilience and creativity of citizens in navigating these restrictions, as seen in Iran's gaming communities and meme culture, offer valuable insights into the broader dynamics of digital resistance in authoritarian regimes.

The Seventh Development Plan also invokes potentially positive outcomes, such as improvements in industry, agriculture, and living standards, aiming to put Iran above all other competition in the Middle East. Nevertheless, it is another attack on some of citizens' most fundamental rights. It allocates over $100 million for developing fiber optic networks across the country under TCI, with the illusion that Internet speed will be improved.[68] The government's intent, however, is likely to use it to its benefit and continue the outlined elements in the Internet Bill. This is glaringly obvious as events developed during the presidential election in Iran due to

[67] "Russia: Growing Internet Isolation, Control, Censorship." 2020. Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/18/russia-growing-Internet-isolation-control-censorship
[68] "Iran allocates $100m for fiber optics projects: TCI." 2023. Iran Daily. https://newspaper.irandaily.ir/7296/6/2005.

the death of Ebrahim Raisi, amounting to hacking, throttling, blocking, filtering, and Internet shutdowns. In Figures 3.1 through 3.4, the IRI motivation to control public discourse becomes even more evident during recent events.

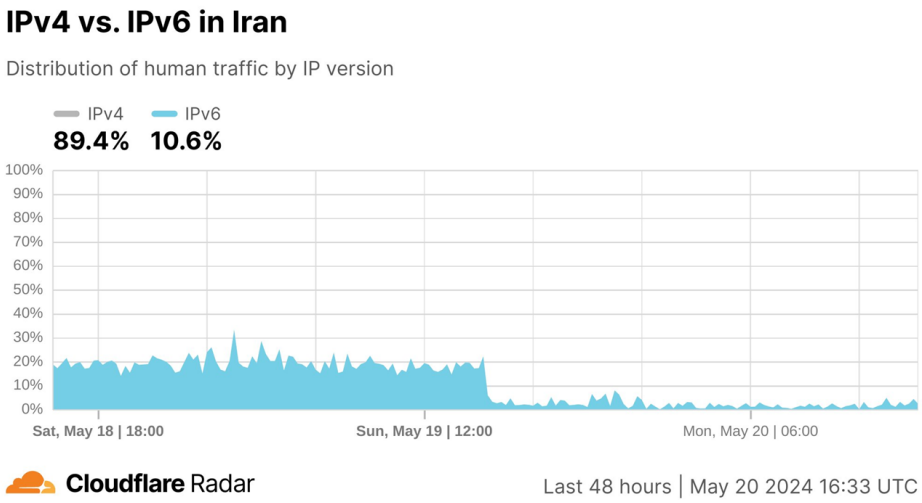

Figure 3.1. IPv6 human traffic stops after Ebrahim Raisi's death on May 19, 2024.

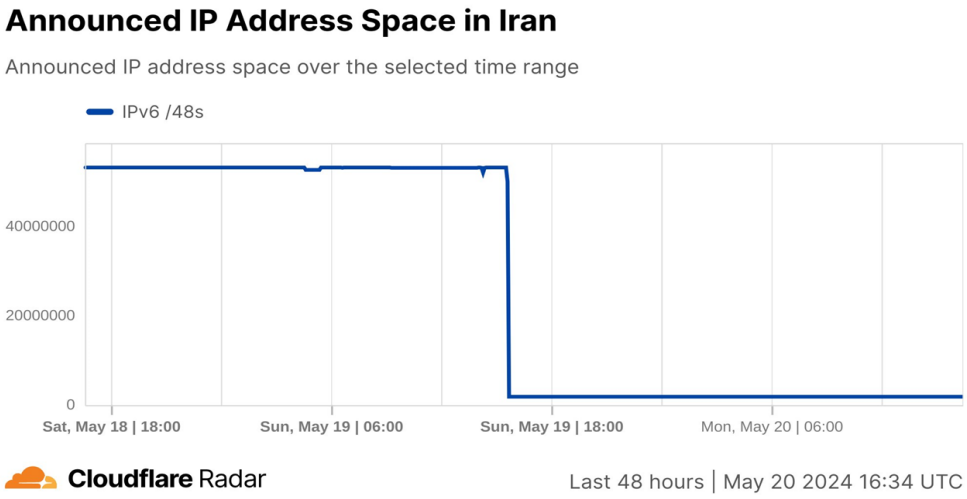

Figure 3.2. Cloudflare Radar also captured IP address space over time (2024).[69] The image comes from a Cloudflare post on Twitter (2024).[70]

[69] This comes from the same tweet as Figure 3.11. See: https://x.com/CloudflareRadar/status/1792599233935135108

[70] Cloudflare is a web infrastructure and security company that provides services like content delivery networks (CDNs), DDoS protection, and domain name system (DNS) management to improve website performance and

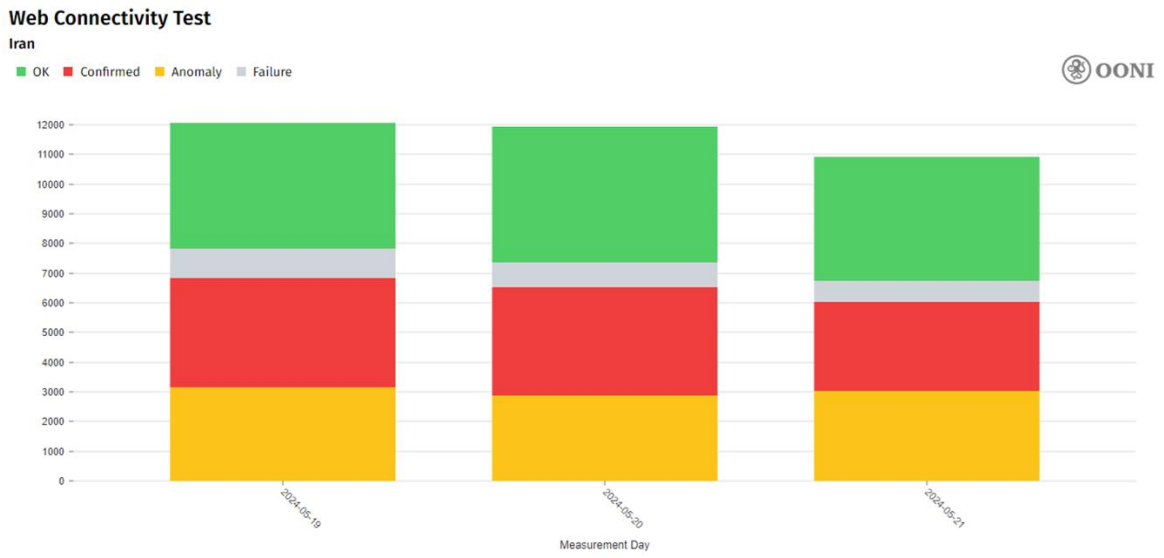

Figure 3.3. Website connectivity test to see if there was an increase in website blocking.

Figure 3.4. Data aggregated for human rights websites.

security. Its data is helpful because it is sourced directly from its global network, which handles a significant portion of Internet traffic, making it reliable for insights into web trends and security. Figure 1 was released on Twitter. See: https://x.com/CloudflareRadar/status/1792599233935135108

Figures 3.1 through 3.4 provide quantitative evidence on Iran's Internet restrictions and usage patterns, emphasizing the state's control over digital spaces and especially the technical mechanisms of soft war tactics impacting citizens' online access to information and communication. Figure 1 represents a graph that compares the distribution of human traffic by Ipv6 in Iran over the same 48-hour period, which shows a complete nosedive during Raisi's death.[71] According to Cloudflare Radar, address space decreased to just 2%. Ipv6 is the Internet protocol that all current devices use. It is an Internet layer that transmits data across multiple IP networks. It also mirrors the first image by showing the broader context of Internet usage during the same period. Figure 2 shows the state-imposed Internet control tactics, such as limiting access to IP address space, which is empirical evidence of state interference suggesting an Internet shutdown in response to Raisi's death. To complement the data collected by Cloudflare, I analyzed websites blocked using the OONI[72] so that I could have a granular understanding of censorship in real-time. I configured the OONI Measurement Aggregation Toolkit to show what web connectivity looked live over 3 days when news spread about Ebrahim Raisi's death. Figure 3 graph represents the connectivity of all websites from 05/19/2024 to 05/21/2024 in Iran. Red means all websites that were blocked. I found that human rights-related sites were especially blocked after Raisi passed. To capture this information, I configured the OONI Measurement Aggregation Toolkit only to show websites that pertain to human rights issues over three days when news spread about Ebrahim Raisi's death. As one can see, the number of blocked human

[71] Despite global trends toward IPv6 adoption, Iran's Internet infrastructure continues to operate primarily through IPv4 protocols. This asymmetric deployment, documented by Cloudflare's network data, reveals significant gaps in the country's Internet modernization.

[72] The Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI) is a free software that measures Internet censorship like website blocking, instant messaging, and circumvention tools. Through real-time analysis, the public can track major censorship events and activate human rights defenders and lawyers. See: https://ooni.org/about/

rights websites spiked on 05/20/2024. The state-sponsored program of soft war becomes evident when there is any potential for political instability, leading to censorship and Internet shutdowns.

The Seventh Development Plan marks a critical juncture in the state's efforts to consolidate control over digital infrastructure. While officially emphasizing family-friendly programs and gender justice initiatives, the plan includes measures that align with the IRI's broader soft war agenda—increased surveillance, censorship, and the promotion of state-controlled digital platforms. These policies reflect the continual development of technical infrastructure as a means of social and political control. Even so, my participants shared the following sentiments about these plans and their impact on Internet use when I asked them individually on Discord in May 2024:

Javad: We suffer access quality due to negligence towards infrastructure as much as policy. We lack specialized human resources. Not to mention, I did not qualify for Irancell during the new fiber optic coverage.

Asma: Connecting to my family is a sad pain. It should just be easy for them to click a browser to chat on social media or video call.

The narratives of digital infrastructure challenges in Iran reveal complex intersections of technical capacity and state priorities. Through Javad's technical expertise, we see how policy shortfalls and human resource constraints shape Iran's digital landscape. While the substantial investment in the National Information Network (NIN) demonstrates the state's capacity for infrastructure development (Cohoon 2022), Javad's experience with Irancell's fiber optic implementation exposes the disparate nature of digital modernization efforts. Asma's dismay at struggling to maintain family connections across borders shows the personal impact of digital restrictions. Her difficulties with basic online activities, such as social media use or video calls,

reveal how technical limitations can create emotional and social challenges. When viewed within the broader framework of state digital policies, these individual accounts illustrate how citizens contend with the dual pressures of state control and the need for social connectivity. The participants' reflections on infrastructural shortcomings show how individuals adapt to and resist these constraints.

Lack of trust in the system runs deep based on high levels of bureaucracy. For instance, the Seventh Development Plan will likely increase data sharing between the Ministry of Information and the IRGC Intelligence Organization on issues like border control, as well as governmental institutions like NIN, which is responsible for throttling Internet bandwidth. Alongside these issues, the plan also seeks to provide more resources to the Basij paramilitary group, parts of which are solely dedicated to cyber-suppression, such as insurance and cost of living. The Seventh Development Plan exemplifies increased centralization and fragmentation in Iran's foreign policymaking, which may indirectly relate to its socio-political landscape. The plan euphemistically emphasizes the development of electronic services and e-government, focusing on modernizing governance through technology. However, the reality is that the Seventh Development Plan works in concert with the government's various organizations to enable tiered Internet, meaning not everyone has access to the very same Internet depending on their background, education, and even politics. Additionally, the Internet's role in Iranian civil society has been highlighted, suggesting that it provides a platform for alternative discourse and could influence political change over time.

Here, I seek to differentiate the Internet Bill from the Seventh Development Plan. The Protection Bill was scheduled for discussion during the last days of the eleventh parliamentary term, and it was even read on the agenda on Tuesday, May 21, 2024. Although it has yet to be

implemented by the Iranian Parliament, Iran's Internet Bill includes several specific policy implementations to regulate Internet access and usage. It proposes to hand over control of the country's Internet gateways to the armed forces, criminalizing unauthorized virtual private networks (VPNs). Additionally, the bill seeks to facilitate government-ordered censorship and surveillance, centralizing Internet infrastructure under government control. In contrast, the Seventh Development Plan has teeth and is being implemented. The plan outlines creating a comprehensive system that records extensive data on citizens' daily lives, both online and offline, which will be stored in a shared database known as the "National Portal for Iranians" (Shakibi 2024). This plan also includes establishing tiered Internet access, where an individual's social class determines their Internet access level, effectively creating a two-tiered system. These policies reflect a significant shift towards increased government control and Internet usage monitoring in Iran. While the state's technological infrastructure aims to constrain and monitor citizens' digital lives through centralized control, the reality on the ground reveals a dynamic interplay between state power and grassroots resistance, as exemplified by the Woman Life Freedom movement's digital tactics

Soft War vs Quiet Encroachment: From Woman Life Freedom to Now

In the dimly lit room of a Tehran apartment, Mina hunches over her cell phone and computer, each connected to a VPN. The screens flicker with incoming messages from protest coordinators across the city. It is October 2022, and the Woman Life Freedom movement has transformed Iran's digital landscape into a battlefield of narratives. "They flood our channels with fake news of pro-government rallies when no one shows up," she explained while scrolling through her phone. "We've learned to create our networks of trust." Her fingers were moving swiftly, verifying information through a complex web of trusted contacts before redistributing it through secure channels. The state's soft war tactics manifest in waves: First came the Internet blackouts, then the flood of disinformation. Government-affiliated accounts spread doctored videos claiming to show protesters attacking ambulances. At the same time, automated bots overwhelm protest hashtags with unrelated content, drowning out genuine voices of resistance. However, the movement has developed its own form of quiet encroachment, or

nonconfrontational tactics, which provide impetus to confrontational ones to those protesting on the streets. When authorities shut down Instagram, protesters responded with offline mesh networks.[73]

In the streets, this digital choreography materializes into physical resistance. Protest locations are shared through encrypted channels, with real locations hidden innocuously. When the authorities flood social media with false protest locations to trap activists, neighborhood networks verify safe routes through a sophisticated system of offline confirmations. The soft war extends beyond Iran's borders. State-sponsored disinformation campaigns target diaspora communities, attempting to sow discord and doubt. Nevertheless, these same communities transformed into digital bridges, relaying verified information back into Iran through increasingly creative channels. "They try to isolate us," said Mina, "but they don't understand that we've built something stronger than their firewalls." She showed me content like protest videos and memes that convey the feelings of a current moment.

During the Woman Life Freedom protests of 2022-2023, state disinformation campaigns and Internet disruption were mounted against the people of Iran. To counter the millions of hashtags chanting in support for the justice of Mahsa Jina Amini on Twitter, IRI state actors sought to mitigate the efforts on the ground by producing disinformation, such as fake links to Starlink Internet to be used maliciously against Internet users in Iran, resulting in imprisonment or death as reported by participants.[74] At the time, the Iranian government was using especially sophisticated technologies to target VPNs, consequently impacting the health of the Internet

[73] Protesters have responded to Internet shutdowns by using offline mesh networks, which allow devices to communicate directly without relying on traditional Internet infrastructure.

[74] Starlink provided satellite-based Internet services during the 2022 Woman Life Freedom protests, with nearly 100 terminals provided by December 2022. There was some talk about fake links provided by the government as a counterstrategy. However, "in May 2023, authorities filed a complaint with the Radio Regulations Board at the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), requesting that Starlink comply with the regime's regulations and licensing requirements since it is banned" ("Iran: Freedom on the Net 2023," 2023). In 2023, "US National Security Agency (NSA) had 'directly' shipped twenty-two Starlink kits – for access to satellite Internet – to Abdol-Hamid's office, but Iranian intelligence services had discovered them" (Tracking the Starlink shipment from the US to the office of Mawlawi Abdul Hamid see: https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1402/08/24/2989188/%D8%B1%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%A8%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%88%D9%84%DB%80-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%86%DA%A9-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%A2%D9%85%D8%B1%DB%8C%DA%A9%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%A7-%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%88%D9%84%D9%88%DB%8C-%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%AF). Starlink is safe to use according to Amir Rashidi at Miaan Group. Eikdar, Solmaz. 2024. "Iranians Defy Internet Restriction with Smuggled Starlink Devices." Iran Wire. https://iranwire.com/en/technology/133773-iranians-defy-Internet-restriction-with-smuggled-starlink-devices/.

network and slowing down Internet speeds.[75] Additionally, circumvention tools like Tor Snowflake were targeted to navigate bandwidth issues and visit blocked sites like Twitter. Over the initial weeks, problems included uploading large files like videos, with the speed of the uploads dropping to extremely slow levels. For instance, while someone could have connected to say a server in Germany at the speed of 3 mb/sec, the Iranian server was .21 mb/s, based on statistics collected from Speedtest by ZoomIT.

Communication Regulatory Authority (CRA) used SIAM technology to throttle mobile service on individuals' phones, including 40 different features that could crack encryption, grant complete access to people's activities, and slow down the data speed.[76] This hindered the use of cell phones so that the CRA, under the authority of the ICT Ministry, could quell protestors and prevent information from leaving the country. And despite the attempt to control the use of cellphones, Iranians still managed to capture the protests through citizen journalism. Interestingly, the IRI spent years blaming poor Internet health and lack of access to platforms on US economic sanctions that directly address how technology cannot come in, nor can citizens have access to it in Iran. Although US sanctions have led to blocking spaces like Google Cloud Platforms, US tech sections were uplifted briefly during Woman Life Freedom break-out protests.[77] Specifically, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control

[75] Mahsa Alimardani, a human rights activist at Article 19, explained in an interview on October 6, 2022, that during the protests between "the period of 4 p.m. to about 1 a.m., mobile networks became almost entirely disabled or, you know, extremely throttled or slow. The Supreme National Security Council also announced that they would be implementing disruptions and blocking Instagram and WhatsApp to maintain national security." In addition to this, she mentioned deep packet inspection of VPNs and, consequently, the health deterioration of the network. "How the tech-savvy keep protests alive – even after Iran shut down the Internet." 2022. NPR. https://www.npr.org/2022/10/06/1127158861/how-the-tech-savvy-keep-protests-alive-even-after-iran-shut-down-the-Internet

[76] "Iran: Freedom on the Net 2024 Country Report." 2024. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-net/2024

[77] "U.S. lets tech firms boost Internet access in Iran following a crackdown on protesters." 2022. The Associated Press. https://www.npr.org/2022/09/23/1124726680/us-boosts-tech-access-iran-protests-mahsa-amini

announced certain web services in Iran are to be exempt from economic sanctions with regards to modern-day technology, i.e., online video games, Internet, anti-virus software, etc., while imposing sanctions against Iran's Morality Police, senior security services officials, and petroleum sales.[78] And despite this availability of platforms once blocked by the US for Iranian citizens, Iranians still had issues with Google, even with a VPN. On top of the prevention of access to these popular platforms, Iranian authorities then used a combination of mass arrests, surveillance, Internet shutdowns, and violence to quell protests.[79]

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the IRI explicitly blocked *DOTA 2*, XBOX games, *Clash of Clans*, Microsoft, Discord, and more to mitigate communication among those who protest (Rashidi 2022). In light of this, many NGOs have been working tirelessly to promote better Internet access conditions as they are continually threatened in Iran, analyzing the right to Internet access from multiple angles to provide a here-and-now solution to Internet user needs. In reference to Article 19, Miaan and others have looked to solutions like VPNs and Internet tiering as issues that dovetail with Iran's current Internet crisis. By and large, VPNs were illegal in September 2022 and are currently illegal, and citizens hypothetically must apply for legal VPNs circulated by the IRI. This has amounted to Internet segregation based on status. For my participants, this means a simple application cannot be used to play online games. Rather, some

[78] "U.S. Treasury Issues Iran General License D-2 to Increase Support for Internet Freedom." 2022. US Department of the Treasury. https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0974

[79] The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), the police, the Cyber Police (FATA), and the Basij were all active in these efforts in 2022. IRGC and the Basij suppress dissent, and FATA monitors online activities (both monitoring and arresting Internet users for protest-related content). Police are often responsible for mass arrests and street-level violence, whereas the Basij militia committed street violence and crowd suppression. The Ministry of Information and Communications is responsible for speed throttling and shutdowns. However, these roles are not concrete and can have overlaps. For example, the Basij Cyber Council monitors online activity but also spreads disinformation. Specific Telegram channels are dedicated to state disinformation campaigns and pro-government propaganda with affiliated authorities from the government, but which ones remain unclear. Meanwhile, the IRGC used state-owned media to push further disinformation online. "Iran: Freedom on the Net 2023 Country Report." 2023. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-net/2023

participants use knowledge to configure their DNS, requiring manually updating the proxy settings. The advanced ability of gamers to gain access to suppressed games and communication technologies makes Iranian gamers among the first to be targeted by the IRI, according to NGOs like Miaan.

In February 2024, I began researching under the supervision of Miaan to see what circumvention tactics are used by gamers in the IRI, unveiling interesting ways participants have gone above and beyond to access the Internet and play games during the research conducted from 2020-2023. Some of my participants' circumvention techniques included using one Iranian VPN to log on to the Internet and another source to connect to censored games via a router. Some other participants set up routers with European VPNs by routing traffic from internal IP addresses to a VPN endpoint in another country, as routers can have VPN integration. Another way the participants accessed video games was by using a VPN phone hotspot for their PC. Other gamers in Iran use GearUP Game Booster for lag or one for SM Tunneling. Others use Shecan DNS and Electro DNS. Usually, gamers waited until later at night to play games so that there would be a lower ping. However, during the protests, this was even more of a challenge because of Internet curfews from 4:00 pm to 12:00 am, which forced users to change VPNs every hour only to have low speeds of 50KB/s.

Gamers must navigate filtering and surveillance using better VPNs and circumvention techniques. These gamers' circumvention tactics vary, especially since they will experience poor ping–latency of data transmitted across servers on the Internet– if they do not use a better VPN or other censorship evasion strategies. Although everyday users in Iran may have been less concerned with other issues like ping–time for data to transmit from one's computer or device to the Internet server back to one's computer or device–a better gaming VPN will likely address

this issue because it would allow a user in Iran to connect to a server outside, especially if it connects through a router with low ping. This is because gamers in Iran are connecting to servers in foreign countries across Europe with minimal censorship. High ping will result in game lag, meaning the game is nearly unplayable. Since a good VPN can decrease ping, other Iranian Internet users who are not privy to online gaming will benefit from better quality circumvention techniques as online technology continues to advance. From the perspective of current participants for the dissertation research, a good VPN will encrypt data and online activity while hiding the DNS. This means some VPN providers tunnel DNS traffic while others do not. While a better VPN will also address DNS issues, there are broader implications for navigating censorship and surveillance, especially with whitelisting protocol.

Looking at how gamers get around whitelisting with other censorship evasion strategies would provide information on how such practices can often have high costs and create more collateral damage for the IRI. VPNs, therefore, have broader implications for navigating censorship and surveillance. Iranian gamer participants who tend to be more tech-savvy Internet users are cognizant of how VPNs work and know better VPNs at that, even though they must change VPNs frequently. Because of access variability types, looking at micro-individual-level variables helps determine access fluidity and connection, which will take shape in the multimodal elements of this dissertation on digitaliranproject.com.[80]

[80] See Appendix B.

Meming the State as Satirical Encroachment

Figure 3.5. Twitch Streamer Javad "memes" this image from a newspaper that shows support for the Islamic Republic of Iran during the Woman Life Freedom Protests.

During the first months of protests, my participants circulated memes and told jokes about the government in response to repressive measures. "Agha agha agha!" Javad laughs while engaging with viewers and commenters on Twitch during his stream. He points to an image circulated by news media in Iran, "Clearly, this is photoshopped" (Figure 3.5). Meme culture among gamers in Iran serves as an outlet for affective intensities–or rather continuous ruptures–such as government crackdowns and violence. This affective turn toward humor provides a coping mechanism for those who bear witness or even have first-hand experience with state-sanctioned violence, or what I encode as state terror, and subverts the narrative of oppression to citizen forms of power. While collective trauma resonates across state lines for Iranians, Iranians respond with various humor styles, including memes. Raymond Williams succinctly states, "Human cultural activity is this immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products" (1977: 128). Memes are serious work–a cultural activity as an immediate response. As a powerful form of communication, memes invoke strong emotional responses and a shared

understanding of experiences. As a cultural activity, meme-making and its virality facilitate community development, a sense of belonging, and thus communication across virtual space, indicating a positive and humorous intent to express political leanings.

Javad is one of many gamers who circulate memes as a way to harness the affective resonance of state-sanctioned violence by linking it to the current issues of protest and government propaganda. When I ask him what he gets out of memes and memeing the state, particularly poking at the IRI, he says, "It's a way to lift spirits, make humor with friends, lament negative experiences...the state cannot crush that like obvious protests." A subconscious desire towards having a normal life, yet anxiety about the status quo, seems apparent from what Javad says. Yet, what Javad suggests aligns with how humor operates as a critical feature in transforming society through affective resonance- a declaration of intensity through a powerful act (Papacharissi 2014). In disrupting the political mainstream, or rather IRI's propaganda, through humor, memes are an example of a satirical form of quiet encroachment because they serve as micro-narratives chipping away at the main narrative, leading to subverted anxiety and provoking criticism of the IRI without a mass call for action.

The spreading of memes that criticized the government during Woman Life Freedom ultimately facilitated the dissemination of information to citizens, usually with cultural impact among *dahe-ye hashtadi-ha*. This response was a manifestation of collective coping yet a conscious effort to diverge from state narratives, specifically the spread of misinformation and cultivation of public opinion towards protestors. To keep the state narrative pervasively enduring, protestors were then charged with anti-government propaganda and for conspiring against God, national security, dress rules, etc. But, of course, this only pushed citizens further away and stimulated more protests and heckling via memes. Memeing the state is not a new

phenomenon. Nor is it a result of the Woman Life Freedom movement. At the same time, memes can be transnational and multilingual. The following memes passed among my participants specifically amplify this idea of transnationalism and its multilingual nature. Figure 3.6 exemplifies the IRI's grasp on other neighboring countries, in this case, Iraq. In other words, the transnational and multilingual nature of memes associated with the Woman Life Freedom movement highlights how cultural narratives and political critiques rapidly transcend national borders, creating a complex, shared digital space for resistance. In the context of Iraq, these memes reveal a dual commentary: they not only critique internal political structures but also signal the IRI's influence beyond Iran's borders. For instance, Figure 3.6 juxtaposes images of PM Nouri Maliki and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, visually encapsulating how the Islamic Republic extends its cultural and political reach into neighboring states.

Memes circulating among participants often mix languages and cultural references, drawing from Arabic, Persian, Kurdish, and even English sources. Such cross-cultural memes serve to bridge disparate protest narratives, allowing activists from different regions to collaborate and share a common lexicon of dissent. By incorporating iconic figures from Iraq alongside symbols from the Woman Life Freedom movement, these memes underscore the interconnected nature of Middle Eastern politics while challenging the IRI's hegemony. By embedding local political figures within a broader regional discourse, these memes bridge geographical and linguistic divides, reinforcing the idea that the mechanisms of state influence and contemporary protest are inherently transnational. The evolution of these digital narratives, crafted in multiple languages and propagated across borders via social media platforms, highlights a new paradigm of resistance—one that transcends traditional nation-state boundaries and fosters solidarity among diverse communities facing similar challenges in the region.

Figure 3.6. Left: PM Nouri Maliki during his time in office in Iraq. Right: Ayatollah Ali Khamenei

And in other cases, cross-cultural memes occur, where the spread of memes from other nearby Arab countries becomes prevalent inside Iran, wherein the US is trolled for its propensity toward galvanizing tensions and creating political vacuums for militant groups in the Middle East and Central Asia (see Figure 3.7). Iranian memes often draw upon cultural idioms, historical references, and everyday experiences to create humor that resonates with local audiences. For instance, memes referencing Persian poetry or traditional customs juxtapose the old with the new, creating a unique blend of nostalgia and modernity. This cultural specificity makes Iranian memes a powerful tool for connecting with audiences on a deeply personal level (Tabatabaei & Ivanova 2021).

Figure 3.7. A political satire meme

While Iranian memes are deeply rooted in local culture, they also draw inspiration from global trends. Localizing popular global memes allows Iranian creators to participate in international digital culture while infusing their content with uniquely Iranian perspectives. This interplay between the global and the local enriches the diversity of Iranian memes (Tabatabaei & Ivanova 2021). The meme above (Figure 3.7) serves as a socio-historical reminder and invocation of recent presidents' grand achievements: President Clinton and the Taliban, President Bush and Al-Qaeda, President Bush and Daesh/IS, and, with tongue-in-cheek sentiment, President Trump and "welcome zombies." A socio-historical meme that critiques U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, illustrating the intersection of humor and political commentary.

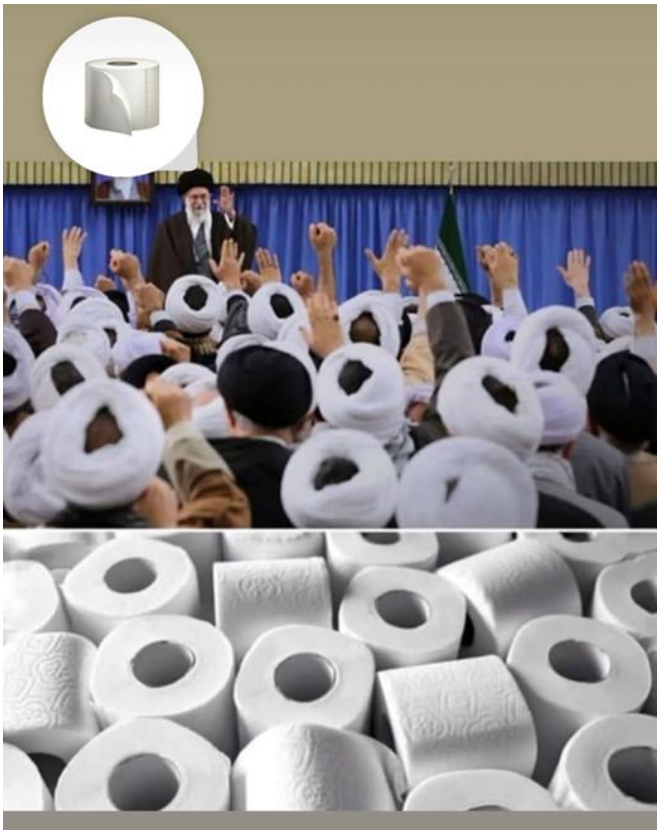

Figure 3.8. A Woman Life Freedom meme.

This meme was passed around during October and November among participants and beyond. The idea is that toilet paper is more valuable than clerics and leadership. In a country where political expression is heavily regulated, memes have become a vehicle for dissent and critique. During significant political events, such as elections or protests, Iranian social media is flooded with memes that challenge authority and highlight societal grievances. These memes often employ satire to critique government policies, economic conditions, and social injustices, providing a voice to those who might otherwise remain unheard. In a political environment where dissent is tightly regulated, such memes are a central part of digital protest because they

allow individuals to express criticism in a coded, humorous manner that can safely circulate on social media platforms like Instagram during critical political moments. Furthermore, the strategic choice to elevate a trivial object like toilet paper into a symbol of resistance reflects a broader trend in protest culture, where everyday items are recontextualized as symbols of empowerment. This contributes to a collective identity among those who oppose the regime, uniting them through a shared language of irony and humor that transcends traditional political rhetoric.[81]

Figure 3.9. Newscaster meme

Gamers passed this meme around with a newscaster's face photoshopped over this popular meme of the disappointed Pakistani cricket fan during the ICC Cricket World Cup in 2019. Anonymous had hacked the news in Iran after the death of Mahsa Amini, and when the newscaster's face showed up on the screen, he had an annoyed look. The Iranian government's

[81] See Chapter 6 on collective identity and tactical frivolity.

strict control over the Internet has led to the development of a unique digital culture where users employ creativity to bypass restrictions. Memes play a crucial role in this ecosystem, using humor and subtlety to convey messages that might be censored in more direct forms of communication. This adaptability underscores the resilience of Iranian digital culture (Tabatabaei & Ivanova 2021).

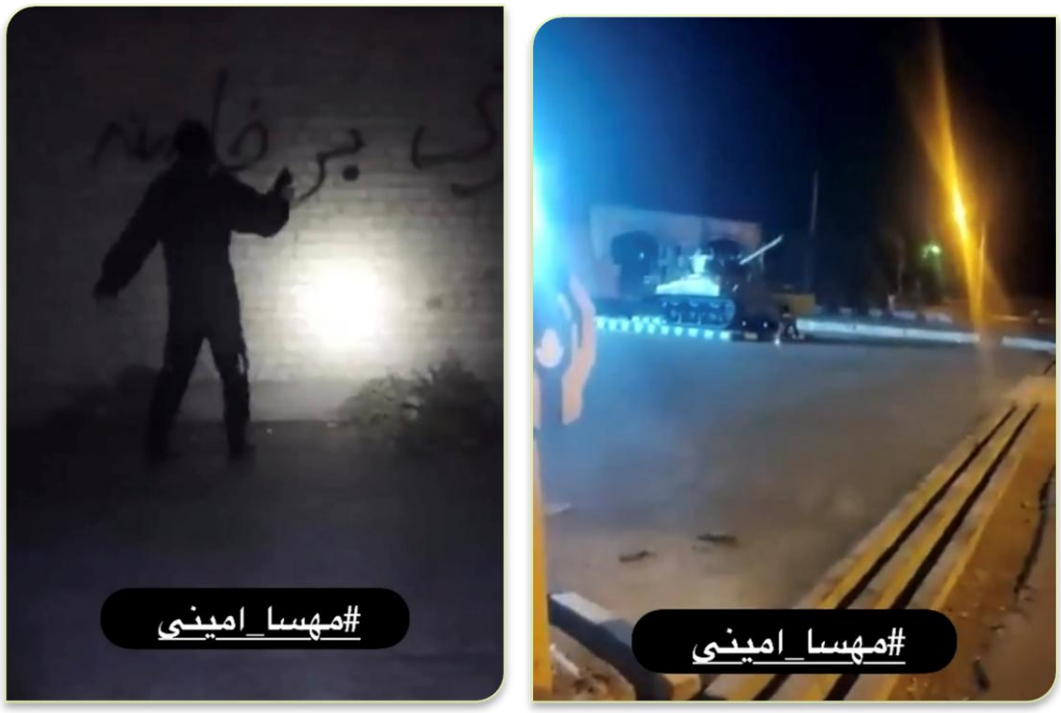

Figure 3.10. Media spread between users on social media during Woman Life Freedom

It is vital to understand how sentiments, and even the spirit of a cause, can lead to and go beyond memes for the protestors. On the left, an anti-regime protestor writes “Death to Khameini” with spray paint. On the right, another anti-regime protestor puts a Maltov cocktail by an IRI tank. The goal is to show the notable difference between humor as non-movement and non-violent action to subvert oppression versus direct action for the movement. Iranian memes

frequently address gender dynamics and social issues, reflecting and challenging societal norms, i.e., tossing turbans.[82] However, the digital space is not without its challenges, as misogynistic and anti-feminist sentiments also find expression in specific meme communities (Tabatabaei & Ivanova 2021).

Conclusion

Iranian citizens' digital resistance and the Islamic Republic of Iran's (IRI) soft war tactics reveals a sophisticated battle for digital autonomy and expression. Through the lens of nonconfrontational tactics, this chapter demonstrated how everyday digital practices – from VPN usage to meme creation – serve as powerful tools of nonviolent resistance against state control. These individual acts of quiet encroachment collectively challenge the IRI's digital authoritarianism without requiring organized collective action. Implementing restrictive policies found in the Internet Protection Bill and the Seventh Development Plan (2024-2031) has intensified the state's control over digital infrastructure. However, Iranian citizens have responded with remarkable resilience and creativity, transforming seemingly mundane digital tools into platforms for resistance. This adaptation exhibits the effectiveness of nonviolence against the IRI's surveillance state, particularly through gaming communities and meme culture.

Additionally, I analyzed participant narratives to emphasize technical and human dimensions of digital access in Iran. These stories reveal how digital restrictions create technical barriers and profound psychological impacts on citizens. Yet, through these challenges, Iranians

[82] Turban tossing refers to the act of physically throwing or removing a cleric's turban during protests as a form of symbolic resistance. It originated as a way to challenge the authority and legitimacy of power figures by transforming a revered religious artifact into an object of ridicule. In this context, the turban becomes a symbol of oppressive state or religious leadership, and tossing it is an assertion of defiance. Over time, turban tossing has evolved into a widespread protest tactic that criticizes traditional authority and serves as a rallying point for grassroots movements seeking social and political change. See Chapter 6 for more information on turban tossing.

continue to demonstrate adaptability and resistance, emphasizing the ongoing tension between state control and citizen agency in digital spaces. As the IRI continues to develop more sophisticated digital control methods, citizens' innovative responses through nonviolent tactics suggest that the struggle for digital freedom will remain a critical battleground in Iranian society. I also believe this indicates broader implications for digital resistance, particularly in authoritarian contexts, that suggests the enduring power of individual agency in the face of systemic oppression.

Chapter 4
The Right to Play

Introduction

Throughout Chapter 4, I will describe how US sanctions impact participants' ability to play games and even Iranian games. In this chapter, I will reveal the intersection of U.S. sanctions and Iranian gaming culture as a complex and multifaceted impact on digital rights, technological infrastructure, and social dynamics. As gaming becomes an increasingly globalized activity, the restrictions imposed by sanctions highlight the broader implications of geopolitical tensions on everyday digital experiences. This chapter argues that U.S. sanctions, particularly under the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" policy, have not only hindered Iranian gamers' access to global gaming platforms but have also created new forms of digital resistance and exacerbated existing inequalities. The chapter has three sections through the lens of economic sanctions: (1) the Iranian video game industry, (2) Gender, and (3) Iranian gamer culture. In doing so, I highlight how the infrastructural challenges of sanctions create economic barriers and social inequalities, particularly regarding gender disparities within the gaming community. At the same time, I show how Iranian gamers have adapted by employing circumvention strategies such as VPNs and alternative payment methods, showcasing resilience and agency in navigating these challenges. Yet, Iran's ability to develop critical Internet infrastructure and video games has been disrupted, leading to high latency and restricted access to global gaming platforms. Between Iranian law and US sanctions, two legally binding processes prevent full Internet access. By examining these dynamics, this chapter sheds light on how international policies shape digital rights and citizenship, using the lens of gaming to explore broader questions of power, resistance, and technological sovereignty.

This chapter is also based on dissertation field research on Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" policy, his failed election, and the concept of a gamer's right to play online games from 2020 to 2021. I foreground interactions and interviews with Iranian and Iranian Americans with the socio-political landscape in the IRI and the US, with the aim of sharing political sentiments and the impact that sanctions have on online communities in transitional spaces (Boellstorff 2008). In May 2018, President Trump withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and applied maximum pressure by re-imposing economic sanctions, which had far-reaching consequences on the economic lives of all Iranians, including gamers' experiences online.[83] In August 2018, US economic sanctions hindered the IRI's ability to fully develop critical hardware and software components imperative to the Internet infrastructure that would improve latency, for instance. Latency, in particular, impacts a gamer's experience in the IRI. High latency causes video games to lag, preventing the ability to enjoy smooth gameplay. During the latter part of the Trump presidency, I met with Javad, a gamer in Tehran, on Discord through a mutual friend in July 2020. We exchanged conversations about his experience with the maximum pressure policy. I also shared conversations between Azar, Darya, and me to show the perspective of women gamers.

[83] US economic sanctions and the maximum pressure strategy on Iran differ significantly in scope and intensity. While both approaches aim to alter Iran's behavior, economic sanctions generally focus on specific sectors, such as oil, banking, or nuclear-related industries. They are targeted measures designed to cripple certain economic activities, leaving room for limited humanitarian trade and diplomatic negotiation. In contrast, the maximum pressure strategy employs a comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach. This strategy expands sanctions across all economic sectors and integrates diplomatic isolation, military posturing, cyber operations, and psychological tactics. By targeting not only Iran's economic base but also its overall regional influence and operational capacity, maximum pressure seeks a more exhaustive degradation of state power. The traditional economic sanctions approach can be seen as a focused tool to pressure a specific policy area (e.g., nuclear proliferation). In contrast, maximum pressure represents a holistic effort to force systemic changes in Iran's regime behavior through extensive and interrelated coercive measures. The maximum pressure campaign aimed to isolate Iran economically, politically, and institutionally, resulting in drastic reductions in oil exports, significant currency devaluation, and a deepening of Iran's internal and external vulnerabilities.

The Right to Play: US Sanctions and the Video Game Industry in the IRI

Digital Ethnographic Fieldnotes. November 21st, 2020. Today, Javad just invited me to talk on WhatsApp chat about his experience as a gamer in Iran. Javad, a single 31-year-old gamer, lives in an apartment in Tehran with friends. I am opening the discussion with questions about games, gaming, and connectivity.

Me: What do you get out of gaming? And how do you think your experience will be impacted by a change in the US presidency?

Javad: When I play games with friends, it's all about having fun. We hope to escape into different worlds to stop thinking about reality. My friends and I don't often talk about Iranian politics because our goal is just to be able to play. Outside of playing, the maximum pressure policy is on the minds of everyone. With the new Biden administration, I think we will continue to face the same issues we did with Trump.

Me: Interesting. So, what do you think you will do when games are so unplayable? Do you end up playing Iranian games?

Javad: We then need to buy VPNs to access some popular online games since gaming companies outside of Iran have to comply with sanctions. So, most of us end up playing PlayStation or Xbox games and buying cheap versions of them in Imam Khomeini Square. Most of us do not play games made in Iran. We see them as a form of government propaganda.

More than 140 game development companies are responsible for the production and distribution of video games in Iran, all of which must promote "nationalism and the Iranian–Islamic culture" (Shahnahpur 2021: 78).[84] To promote Iranian–Islamic culture in video game content, companies are guided by Iran's Entertainment Software Rating Association (ESRA), which analyzes:[85]

- displays of harm and impact on mental experience (violence)
- prohibition of social taboos (tobacco and drugs, sexual stimuli)
- vulgar actions (sexual stimuli)

[84] "Iran's Game Industry: Essential Facts & Key Players." 2016. Iran Computer and Video Games Foundation. En.ircg.ir/news/59/Iran%E2%80%99s-Game-Industry:-Essential-Facts-and-Key-Players-. A
[85] "Iran's Game Industry: Essential Facts & Key Players." 2016. Iran Computer and Video Games Foundation. En.ircg.ir/news/59/Iran%E2%80%99s-Game-Industry:-Essential-Facts-and-Key-Players-. A.

- atmosphere of insecurity and pessimism (fear)
- violation of Islamic principles, such as displays of gambling and sacrilege (religious values violation)
- vulgar language that impacts youths (social norms violation)
- despair and sorrow (hopelessness)
- ESRA also determines a video game's rating based on multiple perspectives, including those of the player, analyzer, narrator, and observer.

Under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the Iran Computer and Video Game foundation ensures that video games invoke the concept of Iranian identity as Islamic, Persian, and deeply rooted in history. Yet, it is this historical and myth-based narrative of Iranian identity that seeks to connect to feelings of nationalism in direct response to US-made games that establish a sense of American exceptionalism (Payne 2016: 94). As *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield 3* creates a sense of American exceptionalism, *Special Operation 85* (2007) emphasizes the same discourse in Iranian culture, one of greatness since time immemorial. *Special Operation 85* thus highlights the theme of Sacred Defense (*defa-e moqqaddas*), which aims to illustrate "heroic acts of the Iranian soldiers at the war front" through their "martyrdom, bravery, resistance, and fealty to higher cause" (Shahnahpur 2021: 79). This rhetoric of Sacred Defense invoked in games like *Special Operation 85* is celebrated in Iranian culture, usually in defense of the Iran–Iraq war and commemorated yearly (Cohoon 2022: 6). However, *Special Operation 85* uses the theme of Sacred Defense somewhat differently than The Flight of Dowran, which explicitly reminds the player of the Iran–Iraq war through combat fight simulation. Instead, Sacred Defense is used in *Special Operation 85* to refer to "an ideological struggle with the US" and Iraq (Šisler 2023: 177).

Iranian leaders have come to impact the content of the video game industry in Iran by promoting narratives of resistance to those who seek to undermine Persian identity and tailoring "local conditions and audiences in order to establish affinities and points of connection" (Jones & Newlee 2022: 2). By preventing incoming foreign ideas through mechanisms of information control, the state also promotes its worldview globally by exporting its ideas into video games. *Devil in the Capital*, developed by RSK Entertainment and produced by Strategy First in Tehran, Iran, is a good example of a game produced as a counternarrative and soft power tactic against the US such that its own ideological campaign is at odds with the past. *Devil in the Capital* uses historical memory through narrative fiction. The game's background story involves the nationalization of the oil industry in Iran, which sought to cut off oil ties to Britain.

In particular, Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh sought to nationalize the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (later British Petroleum Company) in part to establish Iranian national sovereignty and sever British control over the oil sector in 1952. While the US would eventually respond to Iranian oil nationalization by having the CIA overthrow Mossadegh in 1953, the game focuses on the year 1952 when a series of murders occurred to prepare for the eventual CIA coup. The player takes the point of view of Detective Mohammad Afshar and seeks to solve the crime problem in Iran through point-and-click gameplay. Like *Special Operation 85*, *Devil in the Capital* invokes a particular historical memory. While *Special Operation 85* focuses on the memory of the Iran–Iraq War and presents an imagined occurrence between Iranian hostages and US soldiers at Karbala, *Devil in the Capital*'s overarching narrative focuses on foreign and domestic politics with Iran and links the fictitious murders to citizens scheming with foreign entities.

Me: It's interesting to hear how the Iranian government tries to shape the video game industry to promote certain narratives and ideologies. Can you tell me more about how this impacts the games you and your friends play?

Javad: Yeah. The government's control over the video game industry here is really pervasive. All game developers must follow strict guidelines, which changes our content since it must align with Iranian-Islamic culture and values.

Me: So, how does this level of censorship and ideological control impact the games you and your friends want to play?

Javad: We do not think too much about it; we will just play the games we like.

Using video games as a medium for propaganda and ideological messaging is not unique to Iran. Scholars have examined how governments worldwide, including the United States, have leveraged gaming to promote their political agendas (Šisler 2008; Payne 2016). In the case of Iran, the state's control over the video game industry and its emphasis on promoting "Iranian–Islamic culture" can be seen as a form of digital resistance against the perceived cultural imperialism of Western, particularly American, media (Šisler 2008). Javad's preference for playing console[86] games and using VPNs to access international titles can be understood as a form of digital circumvention, a strategy many Iranians employ to access content and services restricted by sanctions and government censorship (Aryan et al. 2013). This practice of "digital resistance" allows Javad and his friends to exercise their "right to play" and engage with global gaming cultures despite the constraints imposed by the Iranian state and international sanctions (Cohoon 2022).

[86] Console and PC are different methods to play video games online. Consoles are anything from XBOX to PlayStation, whereas a PC is exclusively a personal computer. Some people prefer console games over PC games. This could be for a myriad of reasons. Some like using a handheld device to play video games, as opposed to a keyboard. There are several crossovers for computer and console games, i.e., *Call of Duty*, *Ghost of Tsushima*, etc.

After reflecting on our conversation and considering the differences between Iranian video games and games made outside of Iran, I further inquired why Javad chose to play PC games:

Javad: I have been playing console games before I could afford a computer. When I was in my 20s, I'd frequent Internet cafes to play with my friends and would play by paying per hour. But because I like the comfort of playing games at home, it should be accessible, so I will always push back by using a VPN as long as VPNs work.

Me: I'm curious to learn more about the practical aspects of using VPNs to access games. Navigating both the sanctions and domestic restrictions must be quite challenging.

Javad: You're absolutely right. It's a constant battle to stay connected and play the games we enjoy. The sanctions imposed by the US make it difficult for gaming companies to operate in Iran, so we have to rely on VPNs to bypass those restrictions.

Me: Can you walk me through the technical process of using a VPN for gaming? What are some of the practical considerations?

Javad: First, we must find a reliable VPN provider that can bypass the Iranian government's Internet filters. Many of the popular global VPN services are blocked, so we have to do some research to find one that works consistently. Then, it's just a matter of installing the VPN app and connecting to a server outside of Iran. The tricky part is that the government is always trying to crack down on VPN usage, so we must stay on top of updates and be prepared to switch providers if our current one stops working. It's all an ongoing game with the Iranian government and sanctions.

Since 1979, the United States has imposed extensive economic sanctions on Iran, with significant implications for various sectors, like digital technology and the gaming industry.[87] The withdrawal of the U.S. from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 under President Donald Trump marked an additional turning point that led to intensifying

[87] "Locked Out: US sanctions are ruining online gaming in Iran." 2019. Al Jazeera. https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2019/12/23/locked-out-us-sanctions-are-ruining-online-gaming-in-iran#:~:text=As%20Washington%20continues%20to%20ratchet,won%20in%20cross%2Dborder%20tournaments According to Wastnidge: "A second Trump presidency may result in a further doubling down on sanctions and additional support for challengers to the Islamic Republic, with the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 blueprint seeking a new direction in US foreign policy." Wastnidge, Edward. 2024. Reinforcing the Resistance: Iran and the Levant in a Multipolar Middle East. *Middle East Policy*, 53–68. https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12760

sanctions and restricting Iran's access to global technology markets (Segal & Gerstel 2018; Nephew 2018; Robinson 2023). These measures have severely limited Iranian game developers' ability to access advanced tools and platforms, such as Apple and Google stores, which are essential for promoting and distributing their games internationally (Erbrink & Goel 2017).[88] Moreover, sanctions have curtailed access to online services, including multimedia-sharing platforms, social networks, and popular gaming services like Riot Games and Activision-Blizzard's *World of Warcraft*. Iranian gamers often resort to virtual private networks (VPNs) to bypass these restrictions and avoid leaving digital footprints like using Internet cafes that have "extensive use of anti-proxy and VPN services" (Akbari & Gabdulhakov 2019: 223). Combined with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and other bureaucratic entities that Internet filter and censor websites,[89] these sanctions have also encouraged Internet inaccessibility."[90]

Beyond the socioeconomic and cultural impacts of sanctions, which extend beyond economic constraints to influence digital participation and equity within Iran, gender-specific barriers are also a compounding factor for Iranian gamers. Women, therefore, face additional hurdles in participating in gaming tournaments and cultural spaces (Motamedi 2019). Iranian women may receive fines if they attempt to play in game cafes or tournaments. And while women can play online, they face tremendous backlash from observers, especially if they stream

[88] "Iranian Game Industry Suffered by Government Blocking of Google Play." 2024. Iran International. https://www.iranintl.com/en/202403093166.

[89] The system for filtering is complex. It is likely that the IRGC has an Internet Filtering Committee, but it is not clear, and there are many more entities involved. The Commission to Determine the Instances of Criminal Content is responsible for censorship decisions. The judiciary and the Supreme National Security Council also issue filtering decisions, like a Telegram ban in 2018. The IRGC regularly imprisons those who post on Telegram. And to make things even more complicated, reports from Freedom House contradict the Miaan Group on whether the Supreme Council of Cyberspace has passed the Internet Bill. I think, unfortunately, both can be true. It seems that there have been provisions quietly ushered in based on my participant observation and other reports. The Internet Bill sought to criminalize VPNs, which came to fruition in February 2024.

[90] "Iran: Freedom on the Net 2024 Country Report." 2024. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-net/2024. Aryan, Simurgh, Aryan, Homa, and Halderman, J. Alex. 2013. "Internet Censorship in Iran: A First Look." *FOCI 13.* https://www.usenix.org/system/files/conference/foci13/foci13-aryan.pdf

themselves on Twitch—a live streaming platform. Experiencing deliberate harassment and trolling is one reason Iranian gamers may hide their gender and choose not to stream their gameplay online, in addition to potential imprisonment. In many ways, Iranian gaming communities can be described as an extension of the public sphere in Iran: women can face sexism from male gamers and oppression from state-aligned trolls or the cyber police. Yet, despite acute backlash, women make up one-third of the gaming community online. Playing online while pretending not to be a woman thus provides a lifeline to gamers who seek to engage and live their lives as gamers in online communities.

Iranian women's gaming experience can be compared to other contexts. As Nakamura emphasizes while echoing Berlant, women and mixed-race individuals seek the "good life" in gaming so they can satisfy the feeling of belonging; however, the algorithmic rise of racism and sexism in gaming culture creates an obstacle to equal participation.[91] Truth be told, guilds like Origin tend to test potential female gamers much more rigorously unless they come in with a male partner.[92] During the first years of *World of Warcraft*, Origin's guild leader would make female gamers put oatmeal on their feet and take pictures in order to be able to join the guild. Iranian women gamers also experience male violence in the gaming environment. While news reports like Motamedi (2019) share women being harassed for not being married, they are also threatened beyond just being called vulgar for merely taking part of the gameosphere.

As such, misogyny becomes a further complication in the racist backdrop of an otherwise multi-ethnic guild, where they would also go around trolling groups of people with hate symbols

[91] Nakamura, Lisa. 2015. "Racism, Sexism, and Gaming's Cruel Optimism." https://lisanakamura.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/racism-sexism-and-gamings-cruel-optimism.pdf

[92] I was only recruited because of my partner. I would say I represented a very average *WoW* player who could typically parse decently, but was leaps and bounds away from being as excellent as I should have been. See Chapter 5 for more about cultural aspects of Iranian gamers in Origin.

and speech. Huizinga (2014) emphasizes game play as an arena wherein we may freely and voluntarily participate, which opposes serious conduct. However, that is just simply not the case. Gray points out that video games impact day-to-day lives because of how they "interpret, represent, and explain female sexuality, inner city life, black athleticism, among others in that they provide cues to racialized and gendered realities" (2012: 262). I learned much later about this guild lore, but when I did join in 2016, I was yelled at and called a moron on numerous occasions, all so they could be a top 100 guild. Unfortunately, that treatment was relatively restrained for the time.[93] For instance, extremely violent methods are used against women, including leaking sensitive private information like unlisted addresses and social security numbers, false reports to law enforcement, and rapid escalating threats from stalking to graphic violence like rape or racialized lynching (Losh 2016).

To deal with some of these circumstances, gamers use VPNs.

Me: How do VPNs improve your at-home experience?

Javad: It masks my location and provides anonymity so I can access a particular game blocking access due to sanctions. I also use a DNS to join a server so that I have another layer of anonymity.

Me: So, if you have access, are there still issues? Even with gaining that access, does any of that still pose a challenge for you?

Javad: On occasion, yes. Ping is terrible in Iran. When I go onto a network outside of Iran, I still sometimes get numbers in the high 100s to 200s, sometimes even 300s! Some recommendations have been to test server connectivity on another Middle Eastern server to improve the situation. Because of bad ping, even with DNS, I cannot log onto certain games after purchasing them for PC. Sometimes, there is no tactic. But I have found Western EU servers to be better.[94]

[93] Gamergate began in 2014 as a controversial online movement that claimed to address issues of ethics in video game journalism. However, it encapsulated a campaign marked by harassment, threats, and misogyny towards women gamers. The movement attracted attention by targeting prominent women in the gaming industry, such as developers and critics, accusing them of receiving undue advantages and biased coverage. In reality, many of the criticisms were rooted in sexism and a desire to maintain a male-dominated status quo in gaming culture. According to some, Gamergate contributed to the algorithmic rise of the alt-right and Donald Trump.

[94] I have found the reverse to be true when I gathered data for a survey for Digital Iran during summer 2024, which consisted of over 600 respondents. Middle East servers proved to be better for games. However, a myriad of reasons

Ping is an informal word for latency, otherwise known as Packet Internet or Inter-Network Groper, and is a simple Internet program that allows a user to test and request access through a major computer network. With lower than 100/ms ping or low latency, the gamer would be able to interact with the in-game world more fluidly, which is especially important for fast-paced games like *League of Legends* or *DOTA 2*. Bad ping, anything over 100/ms, produces lag in video games, making it difficult to play in the game's world. For Javad, it is sometimes hard to find joy in gaming when barriers like bad ping and lack of server connectivity prevent access to playing games. When Javad explained that Iranians would need to buy VPNs to gain access to "popular online games since gaming companies outside of Iran have to comply with sanctions," he was pointing to a vital reliance on VPNs to bypass digital barriers, reflecting the broader challenges of maintaining reliable Internet connectivity in Iran, where the government exerts significant control over the flow of information (Rahimi 2003; Wojcieszak & Smith 2014).

The use of VPNs in Iran has been well-documented, with scholars noting their importance for circumventing state censorship and accessing restricted online content (Shahbaz 2018; Dal & Nisbet 2022). However, the data also suggests that the technical challenges associated with VPN usage, such as potential disruptions or unreliable connections, can further exacerbate digital inequalities and limit gaming access for some Iranian players. So, while Javad experienced bad ping regularly, a VPN can also significantly impact a game's quality. In other words, Javad experienced other technical challenges faced by Iranian gamers, such as the limited availability of certain game titles and the prevalence of bootleg console games. As Javad stated,

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could also impact ping: applications running on a device, router's location and quality, network congestion, and even the settings within the game that is being played.

"Most of us end up playing PlayStation or Xbox games and buying cheap versions of them in Imam Khomeini Square." This adaptation reflects the broader constraints on the Iranian gaming industry, where domestic game development is heavily regulated and influenced by state narratives (Šisler 2008; Shahnahpur 2021). Iranian gamers' technical barriers are not unique to the gaming industry but rather reflect the broader challenges of maintaining digital infrastructure and technological access in the face of international sanctions and state control (Rahimi 2003). These challenges require Iranian gamers to develop creative strategies and workarounds to continue engaging with their preferred gaming experiences.

The United States sanctions regime against Iran has significantly impacted the country's digital landscape, including the video game industry. Javad's account suggests that the "maximum pressure policy" has forced Iranian gamers to rely on VPNs and bootleg console games to access popular international titles (Cohoon 2022). As other scholars have noted, sanctions have compelled game development companies in Iran to promote "nationalism and the Iranian–Islamic culture" in their content, as they must comply with the restrictions (Blout, 2017; Shahnapour, 2021). For gamers like Javad, US sanctions and IRI policies often go hand-in-hand with bad ping, poor bandwidth, and lack of full Internet access. Javad acutely criticized these practices, stating, "It's simply not a fair situation. I have friends who have built their lives and livelihoods through gaming. This filternet is so frustrating for many." Seeking reliable Internet access proves to be a daunting task for gamers. Javad has pointed out how companies that play games like *Apex Legends* require turning on a VPN even to access the EA games site where it is housed. Like other Iranian gamers, Javad expressed that this is a form of rights violation. "If you purchase the game," Javad quipped, "then you should have access. Why are video games even sanctioned?"

My participants have painted a poignant picture of socio-political realities outside online gaming. A combination of strict Internet rules in Iran and US sanctions prevents Iranian users from easily accessing some of the most popular games. But despite these challenges, Iranians prefer foreign-made games over the ones produced in Iran. When I asked more about the problems that Iranians have with Iranian games, Javad remarked, "There is a nationalistic sensationalism that comes with these games." I then asked, "Aren't US games similar? Is there also a possibility for propaganda in US-made games?" He replied, "Yes, but the quality and gameplay are important to us. Punitive measures in place prevent us Iranians from accessing top-tier games. This is just an Iranian experience that is out of our grasp." Often, companies do not offer much explanation yet uphold so-called sanctions policy on their platforms. Javad, like other Iranian gamers, wants access. When there is poor quality or a lack of connection, the desire to connect to other gamers abroad and domestically propels Iranian gamers to seek circumvention tactics.

The Right to Play: Women's Perspectives and Gender Disparities

In 2020, an Iranian woman gamer named Azar posed a poignant question on social media: "What should I do now that Twitch does not pay for subs, and I do not like streaming on YouTube?" This seemingly straightforward inquiry encapsulates the complex intersection of digital platforms, international sanctions, gender politics, and the pursuit of gaming normalcy in contemporary Iran. The experience of Iranian gamers, particularly women, exists within its own digital borderland, a space where international sanctions, platform policies, and local restrictions create a unique form of digital isolation. This isolation manifests through platform accessibility challenges, where the inability to receive payments through Twitch exemplifies how

international financial sanctions create barriers to participation in global gaming communities. The necessity of VPNs and alternative banking methods reveals Iranian gamers' resilience and the precarity of their digital existence. Women gamers like Azar face compounded challenges, navigating both local cultural expectations and international platform restrictions. Azar's experience provides a crucial ethnographic window into the lived reality of Iranian women gamers. She then told me "It's been 6 months; I sent an email again ... I think so far 6 out of 7 emails have not been answered," revealing a pattern of systematic exclusion beyond mere technical difficulties. The struggle for platform recognition becomes a form of digital citizenship negotiation, where Iranian gamers must constantly prove their legitimacy. The loss of subscription revenue represents more than financial hardship; it signifies the erosion of economic independence and professional identity. The response from other Iranian gamers that "this is a typical experience" indicates a shared understanding of digital marginalization and collective coping strategies.

Pursuing a normal gaming life, or in other words, the ability to participate in global gaming culture without restriction takes on political dimensions in the Iranian context. VPNs and pre-paid debit cards represent not just practical solutions but also acts of digital resistance. The strategic movement between platforms demonstrates adaptive responses to digital exclusion while developing local knowledge networks about platform restrictions and circumvention tools, creating a form of collective resilience. Azar's experience thus challenges traditional notions of digital sovereignty and gendered expectations. Her navigation of platform restrictions, international sanctions, and gender dynamics demonstrates the resilience of marginalized gaming communities and the need for more nuanced approaches to platform accessibility. In a way, Azar must negotiate technical, financial, and social barriers.

By rejecting universal codes of emotions and following concepts of embodied emotions, my study focuses on the intentional affective framework through narratives of feeling and emotion, social embeddedness, and somatically embodied affective cognition. I ponder how local and global laws create these intense entanglements and community engagement. Specifically, I focus on expressing masculinity, femininity, and subjectivity. Thus, I wonder how women and men come to face stigma while playing games among their communities and, more broadly, communities outside of their own in Iran. What are the social and emotional consequences of regulatory practices outside their purview? Digital spaces showcase the forces, energies, and affective potentialities through a palimpsest of cultural and historical experiences that permeate within the body in tandem as a transborder reality. Outside and among online gaming communities, I witness the gaming environment as a palimpsest of moods, introjections, and projections that lead to the desire to reconcile the everyday politicization of what should be normal, like Internet access or gaming.

Women gamers, in particular, face additional issues in Iran beyond the confines of local and international law. In 2019, Iran Games Cup provided two popular categories of FIFA19 and PES19 for a women-only competition, only to cancel the event. While tournaments have attempted to open doors to women, they tend to be canceled, barring women from competition and prize money (Motamedi 2019). Game centers and tournaments tend to be unwelcoming to women. Even in online games, Iranian women gamers experience griefing,[95] deliberate harassment, and trolling from their male counterparts. Despite this affective environment that consequently impacts women's emotions and sentiments of belonging, women gamers find their

[95] Griefing means intentionally annoying another player to disrupt their gameplay. This is especially relevant in multiplayer online games. Some players do this to seek attention or have a vendetta against another gamer. They are also called bad-faith players.

own workarounds to play, and like Azar, they use Twitch to stream their gaming as a live broadcast media.

The affective encounters and the participant responses I have witnessed are intentional. While some theorize an unintentional affectosphere,[96] intentionality opens rather than forecloses potentialities when considering the friction between global connections to a specific context. Darya, another gamer who streams on Twitch, situates a strong mission statement against the politics of everyday seeping into the fantastical boundaries of the Twitch game streaming platform. In essence, Darya takes a strong approach to harassment by stating that talk of politics or religion is banned from her channel, along with requests to play with her. She reminds her viewers and chatters not to be a "douche" as it will result in the viewer/chatter being banned: "Do not be an asshat," she states, "when you know you have been raised with manners." What could be termed in gaming language as a "spicy take," Darya, like other Iranian women gamers, faces an onslaught of assault from men/male gamers. Her "spicy take" manifests as a response to her being overly sexualized and experiencing harassment on the platform. For both Darya and Azar, the agency of gamers becomes constructed through their socio-cultural situatedness as both gamers and Iranians, creating circuits or networks that manifest in the theatre of everyday life.

By understanding the language and dialogical sites of gaming, social media, and Twitch in Iran, I observe a moment, or affective atmosphere, in which women gamers consciously push against such toxic norms. For Iranian women gamers, multiple levels of structure, explanation, and meaning among the participants intersect and create an experience of delight or trauma. Within the affectosphere, normative phantasmagoria shapes and defines the gaming landscape,

[96] I am referring to affectosphere to define a conceptual space, meaning emotional responses activated when encountering a play space like a video game. These emotions are then exchanged between gamers in a collective experience or response.

resisting confinement to reason, will, or language alone. In other words, Gaming creates emotional and imaginative experiences that go beyond what we can rationally explain or control through language or conscious choice. I also see how the forces, energies, and affective potentialities are part of the material and immaterial realities of Iranian women's experience in gaming environments. Professional women gamers have been and continue to be on the rise in Iran, even before individuals flocked to digital technologies to see friends and family during the pandemic. Azar, a 29-year-old woman gamer, enjoys playing *Apex Legends*, a free-to-play hero shooter game, and *DOTA 2*. Unlike some of her influencer friends, Azar streams online in real time on Twitch only occasionally. During our initial meeting on August 1st, 2020, Azar seemed quiet yet resolute when describing her experiences as a woman gamer.

Scholarly literature supports the role of digital spaces as sites of oppression and places of citizen aspirations toward liberation (Hillis et al. 2015; Tufekci 2017; Abrahams 2021). For instance, my research during the *Digital Iran* project emphasizes the dual role of video games as tools of state propaganda and as platforms for resistance (Cohoon 2022). Similarly, studies on censorship in Iran reveal the intricate regulatory measures that shape media consumption and production, further complicating the landscape for gamers (Rahimi 2013). Women gamers in Iran embody a dual resistance: against the patriarchal norms that seek to exclude them from gaming spaces and against the geopolitical forces that restrict their access to global gaming communities. Their participation in gaming is not merely a leisure activity but a form of affective labor that challenges and redefines the boundaries of belonging and identity.

Like with Javad, I asked Azar why she preferred other games made outside of Iran instead of Iranian games. She said, "Those games have much lower quality and are not interesting to me." Like many other Iranian gamers, Azar perceives these games as lackluster and

a form of Iranian government propaganda. These video games are highly censored content that must pass through several bureaucratic checks. Rather than play games that the Iranian government approves, Azar frequently plays *Apex Legends*. When I asked her to describe the game, she stated, "I love that the game is challenging. Other players and I work together as a team through our imagination. The possibilities of the game's terrain make it feel exciting. Through battle royale gameplay and character choices, make it optimal. Not to mention, it is free to play." While Iran experienced a sanctions crackdown on *Apex Legends* in 2019, Iranians eventually found ways to access the game again. Azar's preference for international games over Iranian is a critical commentary on the quality and intent of locally produced games. Iranian games, often perceived as propagandistic and heavily censored, fail to capture the imagination and engagement of players like Azar. Instead, she gravitates towards games like *Apex Legends*, which offer a sense of community, challenge, and creativity. This preference is risky, as accessing these games often involves circumventing sanctions and censorship. Yet, for Azar and many others, the joy and connection derived from gaming outweigh the challenges. Azar stated: "It really was and has been an unfair situation with the game industry outside of Iran. Why should game companies comply with sanctions? Why must Iranians fall under US rules?"

"True," I replied. "I do wonder how you can manage that. Can you tell me more about why you risk using workarounds?" She then paused and remarked that censorship and sanctions will continue to exist whether she plays games illegally or not. "I desire to play games I know I will enjoy," she said. "I feel that my community of gamers supports me and bond with them. Most of us feel that navigating around censorship is worth it, despite the hassle."

Sanctions and Video Game Culture

Economic sanctions are a policy that prohibits almost all economic activity in Iran, from imports to doing business with other companies, as well as sanctions on financial institutions. During President Trump's administration from 2016 to 2020, the U.S. implemented a series of sanctions against Iran, particularly following the withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in May 2018. This withdrawal was part of a broader strategy known as the maximum pressure campaign, aimed at curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions and regional activities, which Trump and his administration deemed insufficiently addressed by the JCPOA. In response to escalating tensions, including the downing of a U.S. drone by Iran in June 2019, Trump ordered a cyberattack against Iranian targets and imposed additional sanctions.[97] The sanctions targeted various sectors, including Iran's central bank and entities involved in cyber operations.[98] Iran's retaliation included cyberattacks and increased uranium enrichment beyond the limits set by the JCPOA, further straining relations.[99] The Trump presidency marked a significant shift in U.S. policy towards Iran, characterized by heightened sanctions, military posturing, and a clear departure from diplomatic engagement outlined in the JCPOA.

During the pre- and post-US presidential election, many Iranian gamers for this study suggested that it would not make a difference whether Joe Biden or Trump is president, fearing that the maximum pressure policy would continue under either a Democrat or Republican presidency. With good reason, this Iranian perspective of US politics was reflected in the status quo as ambitions to renew the nuclear deal shrank as Israel pressured Biden to put a hold on talks

[97] "Confrontation with Iran." 2024. Global Conflict Tracker. https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/confrontation-between-united-states-and-iran
[98] "Timeline of US Sanctions." 2024. Iran Primer. https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/timeline-us-sanctions
[99] "Confrontation with Iran." 2024. Global Conflict Tracker. https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/confrontation-between-united-states-and-iran. "Iran: Background and U.S. Policy." 2024. Congressional Research Service. https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R47321

(Robinson 2023). While the Biden administration promised to lift sanctions if Iran was to come back into compliance, but Iran did not rejoin the JCPOA under the administration (Robinson 2023). Often taking on an apolitical stance, Iranian gamers profess they just to want to play games. While access to the newest games or upgraded content may seem like an easy task for Iranians, it becomes impossible due to the blacklisting of Iranian banks under punitive US sanctions. Therefore, at least on paper, Iranian gamers should not have access to US-made games because many gaming companies comply with US sanctions against Iran. Iranians also lack access to the public cloud.

In contrast, US foreign policy further bolsters sanctions and maximum pressure policies against Iran, prohibiting full access to the Internet and games like *WoW* (Farnan et al. 2019). With over 23 million gamers in Iran among an 80 million population, gamers can aspire to a normal life through escape into different online gaming worlds.[100] However, to access the most popular games in the US, Iranians must have a secure Internet connection, a VPN to hide their location, and often a bank account abroad. Indeed, even local shops, albeit unregulated, must mask their location as they sell the hottest games significantly under price.

As such, sanctions and maximum pressure policy impact the video game industry in Iran. The maximum pressure policy under the first administration of Donald Trump prolonged economic sanctions against the Iranian government, consequently producing punitive measures that prevented Iranians from accessing digital subscription services and basic communication platforms such as email over the Internet (Cohoon 2021). Because the video game industry censors the Iranian Game Industry in Iran, Iranian gamers must look for workarounds to play. Iranians use VPNs, prepaid debit cards, and transnational bank accounts despite these economic

[100] "Iran's Game Industry: Essential Facts & Key Players." 2016. Iran Computer and Video Games Foundation. En.ircg.ir/news/59/Iran%E2%80%99s-Game-Industry:-Essential-Facts-and-Key-Players-.

sanctions to prevent their online isolation from the global gaming community. To remain connected in other gaming worlds, Iranian gamers circumvent Iranian censorship and US sanctions through their use of virtual private servers (VPS). These VPS servers provide anonymity and a connection through the Internet by bypassing Internet Protocol (IP) address blocking.

While Iranian gamers purport that access to games is about enjoyment and fun, the aspiration to play games implicates a political and economic reality undergirded by local and international controls. Considering these precarious avenues to playing games, I will examine how Iranian gamers envision various governmental controls, immaterial affect, labor, and the production of gender divides online. Iranian women, however, face increased limitations in these online gaming and streaming spaces. Iranian gamers work around the limitations of playing because of US sanctions and Iran's Internet policies. Under the Islamic Republic's NIN telecommunications project, the goal is to isolate and contain information sharing on a platform mediated by the government in adherence to political and cultural norms.[101] Iranian women who use platforms outside of the political and cultural norms face more severe reprisals on social media from state-aligned trolls (Kargar & Simin, 2019). Consequently, Iranian women are doxed by their male peers and experience "vulgar and misogynistic references" while men are targeted with "political slurs" (2019:1513). It is not only against the law to bypass the Iranian IP network, but my research also reveals how Iranian women encounter the Iranian government's state-aligned trolls and their male peers.

Often perceived as part of the mundane, online experiences shape our lives in socio-political ways that determine new conceptions and constructions of identity (Stewart 2010).

[101] "Tightening the Net: Internet Security and Censorship in Iran – Part 1: The National Project." 2016. Article 19. https://www.article19.org/data/files/The_National_Internet_AR_KA_final.pdf

Gaming spaces provide new ways to interact in an immersive online environment, offering visuals, sounds, and player engagement. Unlike other online media, the player becomes the central figure that must abide by mechanics, known as the rules of the game, yet will likely interact with the game environment and players through integrating and even expressing themselves. Iranian and Iranian American women gamers experience moments requiring them to push against gatekeeping (Kargar & Simin 2019). These impactful moments in online environments create unity yet are unsettled environments due to games receiving upgrades. The transaction between gamers, which runs the gamut of bonding and trauma, produces moments of vulnerability and resistance (Stewart 2010). For women, this means hypervigilance and awareness of their male counterparts (Kargar & Simin 2019). However, even for the hyperaware, threats or subtle sexism still permeates.

The online platforms are a transnational public sphere for Iranian and Iranian American women, and in some cases, how they face alt-right sentiments and harassment, which either creates an inclusive or unwelcoming environment (Bayat 2009). Regardless, Iranian and Iranian American women gamers seek to play games online despite having to contend with highly masculinized and often racist sentiments (Kargar & Simin 2019). Through quiet encroachment, I situate the politics of ordinary life as "noncollective but prolonged direct actions of dispersed individuals and families to acquire necessities," such as using public spaces, pursuing informal work, or even engaging in practices of everyday life online (Bayat 2009: 35). These noncollective, prolonged actions, are consequently influenced and mitigated by politically nefarious intentions. Iranian and Iranian American women online use virtual tools in material and non-material ways but must overcome coercive alt-right influences such as suppression or economic repercussions. Effectively entangling trauma and pleasure in online streaming

produces discord, embodied labor, and social as well as material subjectivities (Barad 2007; Stewart 2010).

Iranian gamers largely play games made outside of Iran. Azar and Javad believe it is worth the effort to access games through circumvention tactics like VPNs despite the robust Iranian video game industry (Khoshsaligheh & Ameri 2020). Iranian government seeks to develop new technology and media to maintain its cultural initiative of soft war.[102] Like other forms of media and the Internet, the video game industry must maintain ideas, culture, and nationalism that are inherently Iranian, normative, and non-vulgar. As such, the Islamic Republic has sought to control the expression of multimedia content through censorship, preventing undesirable and even vulgar online participation and seeking to quell any form of protest countering the Iranian government's initiatives. Social media and gaming are similarly censored to contain information and communication technology and, therefore, prevent discourses that do not support the Iranian government's initiative. In Iran, more than 100 companies and institutions are active in different sectors of the video game industry, preventing anything that could potentially undermine the cultural values of the Islamic Republic (Ahmadi 2015:286). Because of the IRI's hypervigilance in censoring games, Iranian gamers tend to see Iranian games as a form of propaganda.

During the 1980s, video games came to Iran amid the Iran-Iraq war (Ahmadi 2015:271). Yet, with the 1979 revolution charging the political sphere in Iran, the Iranian game industry has treated video games as a sensitive topic requiring political leaders to warn of the dangers of Western country cultural attacks via virtual space. The aims of the cultural policy of the new Iranian state were predicated on destroying Western imposition on culture and replacing it with a

[102] "Tightening the Net: Internet Security and Censorship in Iran – Part 1: The National Project." 2016. Article 19. https://www.article19.org/data/files/The_National_Internet_AR_KA_final.pdf

dignified, indigenous, and authentic Islamic culture (Blout 2017; Shahnahpour 2021; Cohoon 2021; Cohoon 2022). Monitoring video games is, therefore, a method of defense against cultural imperialism for the government of Iran. However, most Iranian gamers play bootleg games or use VPNs to access online games made in the West. Games specifically became popularized in Iran with the first generation of game consoles like the Atari VCS 2600 (Ahmadi 2015: 271).

However, the Iranian game industry did not develop extensively until the 1990s and 2000s. Under Kanoon, a semi-governmental game development company, games were produced with a focus on culture, education, and simplicity (Ahmadi 2015: 276). Establishing semi-governmental game agencies became the norm in Iran. In 2007, the Iran Computer and Video Games Foundation was founded to better understand the broader game industry and set higher standards within a game. However, such semi-governmental companies are guided by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which actively selects what games are or are not appropriate for the Iranian consumer (2015: 177). The subsidiary of the Ministry, the Center for Development of Information and Digital Media, overseas festivals, and the marketing of computer games, while the Ministry subsidiary Department of Audio-Visual Cooperation is responsible for issuing licenses for games and game developers. This bureaucratic design ultimately focuses on censorship and regulating the so-called authentic Iranian culture. For instance, the Iranian government's National Plan for Computer Games in Iran, guided by the Supreme Council for Cyberspace, claims to supervise and regulate game production to boost the game industry in Iran. Because of this censorship hypervigilance, it seems improbable that Iranian gamers will change their minds anytime soon about the Iranian video game industry.

Using specialized channels on Telegram, the most popular social media application in Iran, the most recent study on Iranian gamers found that demographically, they are made up of

97.6% male and less than 3% female (Khoshsaligheh & Ameri 2020: 8). The discrepancy in these findings between scholarly work and the Iran Computer and Video Games Foundation provides a unique context to examine questions of gender within the affective infrastructure of gaming. Iranians desire to play games, just not the ones made in Iran. According to my participants, the Iranian gamer experience is further impacted by US sanctions that have, at least on paper, prevented Iranian access to online video games. In addition to Iranian policies, US sanctions against Iran hinder Iranian access to video games. Iranians also lack access to a public cloud, like GitHub, Google, and Riot Games. US foreign policy bolsters sanctions and maximum pressure policies against Iran, further prohibiting full access to the Internet and games such as *WoW*. Coupled with the fact that the video game industry deeply censors Iranian games, the maximum pressure policy under the previous US administration has sought to ratchet up economic sanctions upon the Iranian government, which consequently enforces punitive measures that prevent Iranians from accessing digital subscription services and basic communication platforms, such as email, over the Internet. Sanctions and maximum pressure policies thus impair the everyday use of Internet technologies through "entanglements born of capitalist alienation," including trade and access to the global economy (Osanloo 2020: 4). In response to these regulatory constraints, Iranian gaming enthusiasts employ various technological and financial circumvention strategies, including virtual private networks (VPNs), international prepaid payment methods, and offshore banking solutions, to maintain their participation in the global gaming ecosystem (Cohoon 2021).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I showed how the intersection between US sanctions and Iranian gaming culture exists together in a complex web of technological, social, and political challenges. I argued that the US sanctions challenge the digital sovereignty of gaming spaces through infrastructural control and challenging fundamental digital rights. Iranian gamers demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability despite significant obstacles, including high latency, restricted access to international gaming platforms, and economic barriers due to sanctions. They employ various circumvention strategies, including VPNs and alternative payment methods, to participate in the global gaming community. The impact of sanctions extends beyond mere gaming access, affecting fundamental Internet infrastructure and creating disparities in the gaming experience between Iranian players and their international counterparts. Rather than simply limiting access, sanctions have produced new forms of digital citizenship and resistance while simultaneously reinforcing existing power structures and inequalities. This suggests that gaming has become a crucial site for understanding how international policy impacts digital rights and citizenship in ways that go far beyond simple access to entertainment.

The gender dynamics within Iran's gaming community, with the stark disparity between male and female participation rates, further highlights the multifaceted nature of gaming access and participation in the country. I illuminated how geopolitical tensions, and international policies directly affect individual experiences in digital spaces, particularly in the context of gaming communities. While often taken for granted in many parts of the world, the right to play becomes a complex negotiation of technological workarounds, political restrictions, and social dynamics for Iranian gamers.

Chapter 5

Socio-technical Lifeworlds in World of Warcraft and DOTA 2

Introduction

World of Warcraft (*WoW*) has long been a digital meeting ground for Iranian and Iranian American gamers, fostering transnational communities and connections across borders. However, since November 2020, these virtual communities have been disrupted by Blizzard-Activision's crackdown on VPN usage and ongoing sanctions, effectively banning Iranian players from accessing the game. Even so, many of those games, like *DOTA 2,* require circumvention tactics. Participants like Iranian Azar have suggested leaving the *WoW* community altogether for *Final Fantasy* because of the culture in *WoW*. Research on information controls in Iranian cyberspace has shown that while VPNs were effective mechanisms for playing *WoW*, many Iranian gamers started playing other games. This shift reflects a broader pattern in Iranian digital behavior, where users adapt to sanctions through various circumvention tactics. Even so, many of those games, like *DOTA 2*, require similar circumvention strategies. In this chapter, I argue how these technical restrictions and digital barriers fragment existing gaming communities and catalyze new forms of digital adaptation and migration as Iranian gamers navigate complex sociotechnical systems to maintain their gaming practices and community connections. Through examining Iranian gamers' experiences with *WoW* and their subsequent migration to other gaming platforms, this chapter reveals how digital protectionism and information controls reshape transnational gaming communities and force players to develop innovative circumvention strategies.

In this chapter, I analyze how Iranian gamers construct and navigate sociotechnical lifeworlds in *WoW*, interrogating how these digital realms function as crucibles for cultural

production, resistance, and community-building beyond traditional gameplay.[103] In it, I include the perspectives of Farid, an Iranian Canadian, and Mahdi, an Iranian. In the final section, I bring in conversations with Iranian women Azar and Mariam. I structure the chapter around the sociotechnical systems that permeate the game. Sociotechnical systems exist beyond the virtual world experience, emerging as interconnected lifeworlds created by groups rather than merely extending their "sensorial immersion" as raiders, leading to knowledge-makers (Golub 2010:19). Therefore, this chapter touches on how competitive Iranian gamers create sensorial immersion through knowledge-making activities in sociotechnical lifeworlds.[104] However, immersion can have deleterious effects on personal subjectivities, specifically on women. Rather than divorcing sociotechnical systems from affect, I claim immersion manifests differently than it does for the average player. Instead, the virtual becomes doubly lived through the interconnected minds of gamers who engage with content on a higher level. When applying the concept of a sociotechnical system, gamers spend time with one another in real life, either in the real world or on Discord. In Farid's guild, the teammates communicate with one another through a guild-pre-

[103] I am defining sociotechnical lifeworlds within a particular context. I take the term lifeworld from a series of scholars: Edmund Husserl's *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (1970) and Michael Jackson's *Lifeworlds: Essays in Existential Anthropology* (2012). I use it in conjunction with ideas on complex gaming worlds that go beyond virtually logging into the game. Lifeworld here means where consciousness meets shared social meanings wherein gamers experience technical constraints and social dynamics that they must navigate in order to have a meaningful gaming experience. Sociotechnical then refers to Alex Golub's research on *World of Warcraft* who defines it as a way to navigate both technical (game mechanics, interfaces, and servers) and social relationships (guilds, raids, and player interactions) as an integrated whole rather than separate spheres. When put together, I contribute to the body of literature the term sociotechnical lifeworlds, meaning the layers of experience and worldbuilding that come into reality through digital immersion, use of techniques to access the Internet, and gaming cultural norms in and outside of Iran.

[104] I therefore succinctly define sociotechnical lifeworlds as the interconnected spaces where Iranian gamers navigate technical systems that they are immersed in, social relationships, political constraints, and emotional strategies, creating meaningful digital experiences, which require gamer responses to additional factors like censorship, sanctions, and cultural dynamics. Or in other words, I am referring to a complex interrelationship of technical, social, political, and emotional elements that shape Iranian gamers' digital experiences, focusing on how they navigate constraints like censorship and sanctions to create meaningful, networked spaces of connection and normalcy.

created Discord server during raid night, which allows the players to communicate with one another using a key bind to have a push-to-talk function (i.e., Ctrl or Caps Lock).

Drawing on theories of sociotechnical systems and lifeworlds, this analysis examines how gaming platforms function as sites of community formation and technological contestation (Barad 2007; Golub 2010; Jackson 2013).[105] The framework of sociotechnical systems allows us to understand how technical elements (such as VPNs, game mechanics, and digital restrictions) interweave with social practices (community building, raid coordination, and cultural adaptation) to create complex gaming environments. This connects to Jackson's concept of lifeworlds as a "force field (kraftfeld)" (Jackson 2013:23) that encompasses the dynamic interplay of ideas, passions, and moral norms within a community, applied here to understand how Iranian gamers create and maintain digital spaces of interaction. Meanwhile, sociotechnical systems, drawing from Golub's analysis, are the integrated social and technical elements that enable "coordination and knowledge sharing" (Golub 2010:35-38) within gaming communities, such as Discord's platform features and community-developed verification processes. Golub combines the term sociotechnical lifeworlds as rhizomatic anthropology to be understood through culture but does not elaborate further (2010:39).

This theoretical approach relies on three key aspects of Iranian gamers' experiences: First, it examines the role of raid mechanics and Discord interactions as sociotechnical apparatuses that both enable and constrain community formation, particularly through the lens of specific gameplay affective moments like the Hungering Destroyer encounter. Second, the analysis investigates how the migration of players to alternative games like *Final Fantasy* represents a shift in gaming preferences and a broader response to digital protectionism and

[105] In Appendix A, I show how sociotechnical lifeworlds are shaped through gatekeeping.

community fragmentation. Third, the chapter also considers how Iranian players navigate technical barriers through various circumvention tactics, revealing the creative ways communities resist digital exclusion by analyzing gamers' experiences in games more readily available to them, like *DOTA 2*. By examining these interconnected aspects, this chapter contributes to broader discussions about digital rights, transnational gaming communities, and the impact of geopolitical restrictions on virtual spaces. The experiences of Iranian *WoW* players offer crucial insights into how marginalized gaming communities adapt to and resist digital exclusion while maintaining their cultural and social connections across virtual borders. Through detailed analysis of gameplay footage, player interviews, and community interactions, this research demonstrates how gaming platforms serve as critical sites where technical restrictions, community resilience, and cultural adaptation converge.

Restrictions create unique challenges for Iranian gamers, forcing them to navigate complex technological and legal landscapes. Participants like Iranian Azar have suggested leaving the *WoW* community altogether for *Final Fantasy* because of the culture in *WoW*. This migration pattern aligns with research on digital diaspora communities, which shows how online gaming spaces can unite and fragment transnational communities. Another dynamic to consider is who made the game, which had a salient influence across the expansions. Iranian American Alex Afrasiabi, former Designer and Senior Creative Director at Blizzard Entertainment, was named in a lawsuit regarding his behavior towards women in the company.

Afrasiabi aggressively pursued women employees and even had a hotel room called the "Cosby Suite" (also known as the Coz room) with a Cosby framed picture used for "meetings," which routinely put the male colleagues ahead of their female counterparts. In alleged screenshots from a group chat at BlizzCon 2013, one message explained how they collected

women for the Coz room and mentioned that "you can't marry ALL of them Alex." Afrasiabi responded, "I can, I'm Middle Eastern" (Perculia 2021). Due to blatant sexual harassment, the suit points to a woman employee at Activision Blizzard who ultimately died by suicide because of a male supervisor posting nude photos around at the company holiday party. Currently, the victim has been unnamed, with Activision Blizzard acknowledging in the rebuttal but likely enforcing an NDA when the death by suicide occurred. However, such behavior among developers seem par for the course. In China, game developers of *Black Myth: Wukong* have explicitly said they will not pander to female players and that they do not care if lewd behavior is featured in the game.[106] When I asked Farid about Afrasiabi over Discord messaging in May 2022, he said, "Obviously, this kind of behaviour has no place in any industry. It was disappointing to hear that Alex was directly involved in misconduct, as he is someone who was a major contributor to the game I love. I didn't hear any comments from my social circles or elsewhere about his misconduct."

Farid and Origin

In the evolving landscape of digital worlds, Iranian and Iranian-American *WoW* players represent a compelling case study of how virtual worlds shape cultural production and community formation in the face of geopolitical constraints. As Boellstorff (2015) argues, digital sociality has become a crucial site for understanding contemporary human relationships, particularly in contexts where physical borders and political sanctions create barriers to connection. This analysis examines how Iranian gaming communities navigate digital spaces, adapt to technological restrictions, and maintain cultural connections despite institutional

[106] Ma, Wenhao. 2024. "Political criticism and controversy swirls ahead of China video game release." VOA News. https://www.voanews.com/a/political-criticism-and-controversy-swirls-ahead-of-china-video-game-release/7750751.html

challenges. Farid, a dedicated Iranian *WoW* player, found his strongest sense of digital community within Origin, a guild that exemplified virtual kinship structure in online gaming spaces (Boellstorff 2015). As one of Origin's guild officers, Farid's deep involvement in guild activities and raid leadership demonstrated collaborative engagement where players create meaningful social bonds through shared virtual achievements and challenges (Nardi 2010).

Digital Ethnographic Fieldnotes. December 2020. Castle Nathria, located in the Revendreth, inhabited by the vampiric Venthyr Covenant in a land of sprawling gothic castles and spires, is the first raid of the Shadowlands expansion. In the Castle Nathria raid, there are ten bosses. To progress as a raiding team, players must first kill the Shriekwing, a bat-like gargoyle boss that uses abilities like sonar to cause damage to players. After defeating Shriekwing, the second boss, Huntsman Altimor, is unlocked and summons pet minions. The third boss unlocked is Hungering Destroyer. Farid's guild Origin took 13 pulls–meaning when the boss is engaged by the Tank–to kill the first two bosses on December 16th, 2020. The WoW guild Origin met together on Discord to defeat Mythic Hungering Destroyer on December 19th, 2020. Describing themselves as a Mythic progression guild, many of these players have played WoW together as a cohesive group since the original content in 2004, also known colloquially as Vanilla. While shooting the breeze before the raid begins, these players sought to maintain a high standard of play to continue to reach a higher rank in each tier–a new level of raiding for each expansion that affords new and better gear for players. With ongoing inside jokes, humor became essential to this group's play, but by and large, it is often relegated to before, after, and the Union 5 (a five-minute break taken during the raid). Nevertheless, the grinding nature and relative ease of Mythic Hungering Destroyer afforded me, the observer but also an avid WoW gamer, nothing short of slapstick comedy as the raiders engaged in fun wordplay despite the challenges they were about to face during this particular boss fight.

Figure 5.1. An image of the Hungering Destroyer

Reflecting back on Farid's Hungering Destroyer fight, the distinction between serious raid time and social time (before/after/breaks) shows how this guild community manages different modes of interaction. The role of humor, particularly during breaks and pre-raid periods, served as social glue. At the same time, during the fight itself, temporal rhythms and rituals were paramount to Farid and his guild's success in defeating the boss. As discussed by Ruth Leys (2011), affect theory provides a lens to understand these interactions' emotional and embodied dynamics. Leys critiques the notion of affect as entirely pre-cognitive, instead emphasizing the interplay between emotion, cognition, and social context. In the context of Farid's guild, humor and camaraderie during breaks and pre-raid moments can be seen as affective practices that reinforce group cohesion and shared purpose. These moments of levity are not merely incidental but are integral to the lifeworld of the guild. Lifeworlds are the lived,

intersubjective worlds shaped by shared practices, rituals, and temporalities. For Farid's guild, the lifeworld is constituted by the rhythms of raiding, the shared history of playing together since 2015, and the collective striving for progression. The temporal rhythms of the raid—marked by pulls, breaks, and boss kills—are not just mechanical or procedural but are imbued with affective significance.

Figure 5.2 A screenshot of Farid and his guild fighting the Hungering Destroyer.

The Union 5 break, for instance, is not merely a pause but a ritualized moment that allows for the recalibration of focus and the reinforcement of social bonds. During the fight itself, the intense coordination and focus required reflect a different mode of affective

engagement, one that is more attuned to the collective rhythm and flow of the raid. This oscillation between modes of interaction—humorous and relaxed versus focused and intense—illustrates the dynamic interplay of affect and lifeworlds in the digital ethnographic field of *WoW* raiding. By weaving together affect theory and the concept of lifeworlds, we can better understand how Farid's guild navigates the challenges of Mythic raiding. The humor, rituals, and temporal rhythms are not just background details but are central to the guild's ability to function as a cohesive unit. These practices create a shared affective atmosphere that sustains the group through progression, emphasizing the importance of social and emotional dynamics in digital ethnographic contexts.

*[00:01] *Ding* The countdown from 10 seconds began on Farid's screen, indicating when all the raiders will pull Hungering Destroyer, the third boss in Castle Nathria. Hungering Destroyer, a dark gray behemoth in the middle of the room, was surrounded by red lanterns on the side. When the players had cast their gaze on the boss, they saw a lumbering, tall, gray rock-like creature with three fingers on each hand, three toes on each foot, and an ethereal blue head. This is the 32nd pull. Each pull prior consisted of failures that ultimately taught the 20 Raiders how to better work cohesively as a team.*

[00:02] The Guild Leader told the raiders: "Do that again, a little bit cleaner."

[00:03-00:10] The countdown continues down to 1. During the remainder of the countdown, I noted that the monitor's light lights up Farid's face and reflects back onto his black-rimmed glasses. A Logitech Blue Yeti Microphone is mounted to the side and hangs nearby so that he may use his voice to interact with other players on Discord and his Twitch stream. Farid exhibited minimal affect, nonchalance, and an overall calm demeanor compared to most mythic raiders, who are often more on edge during boss fights.

Farid's "minimal affect, nonchalance, and overall calm demeanor" during the 32nd pull of the Hungering Destroyer encounter exemplifies the affect theory principles, particularly as Ruth Leys articulated. Leys' critique of affect as purely pre-cognitive is relevant here, as Farid's calmness is not an absence of affect but rather an embodied response shaped by his mastery of the game's mechanics and the social context of the raid. His demeanor reflects a cultivated affective state that emerges from repeated practice and the shared rhythms of the guild's raiding

lifeworld. This calmness is not merely individual but is part of the collective affective atmosphere of the guild, which balances focus and humor to sustain cohesion and performance. The concept of lifeworlds further illuminates the guild's collective learning process during the raid. The "32nd pull" is a technical iteration and a moment within the guild's shared temporal and affective rhythms. Each pull represents a cycle of failure, reflection, and adaptation, where the guild operates as a community of practice. In this context, failure is not a setback but a mechanism for collective learning and growth. The Guild Leader's instruction to "do that again, a little bit cleaner" encapsulates this iterative process, where the group refines its coordination and strategy through shared effort and mutual accountability. Thus, Farid's calm demeanor and the guild's iterative learning process are not isolated phenomena but are deeply interconnected. The temporal rhythms of raiding shape the guild's lifeworld, the affective practices that sustain group cohesion, and the shared goal of progression. Farid's embodied expertise and the guild's collective learning are both products of and contributors to this lifeworld, illustrating the interplay between individual affective states and collective practices in digital ethnographic contexts.

[00:10-00:11] The raiders then get into position and pull the boss. Farid had cast Time Warp buff, a mage spell lasting 40 seconds that increases haste by 30% on all party and raid members to do more damage to the boss with their own spells and abilities. Farid's screen flashes "Hungering Destroyer engaged – Berserk in 7 min," indicating that all players' characters will die if the boss is not defeated in the 7-minute allotted time.

The "ding" sound at [00:01] serves as a temporal anchor wherein a technological signal coordinates collective action across distributed physical spaces (Pink et al. 2016). The technological signal, or rather, the ding, evolved into the beginning steps of the fight – the countdown sequence [00:01-00:10]. A sort of "techne-mediated copresence," where players' actions are synchronized through both technical systems (the countdown timer) and social

protocols, Origin guild members were mentally preparing to begin the fight (Boellstorff 2008: 238). The "Berserk in 7 min" mechanic creates temporal boundaries that structure collective action. This technical constraint could shape a finite province of meaning within which raiders must operate. But, as an elite guild, they must come prepared to play.

Yet, the moment of pulling the boss, marked by Farid casting the Time Warp buff and the screen flashing "Hungering Destroyer engaged – Berserk in 7 min," exemplifies the entanglement of affect, technology, and collective action. The "ding" sound and countdown sequence serve as affective triggers, orienting the raiders' attention and synchronizing their actions. These technological signals are not merely functional but also shape the emotional and cognitive states of the players, creating a shared sense of anticipation and readiness. The act of pulling the boss is not just a human action but an entangled phenomenon where the players' affective states, the game's mechanics, and the technological systems co-constitute with each other. The "Berserk in 7 min" mechanic can also be seen as a temporal boundary that structures the players' actions and decisions, entangling their agency with the game's design.

The countdown and subsequent pull are not isolated events but are part of a broader lifeworld shaped by preparation, strategy, and collective learning. Farid and his guildmates must constantly update their in-game modifications for playability to maximize their success rate in defeating major monsters in *WoW*. In addition to updates, Farid and his teammates must learn the rules of the game, called mechanics, so that they can perform well in the game with one another. The guild's pre-raid discussions on Discord and their use of Public Test Realm videos reflect their sociotechnical systems' dialogical and virtual nature, where knowledge is co-constructed and shared across distributed spaces. Some players are given early access and learn the boss mechanics during the testing phase of a new raid tier. This is then released on YouTube so that

other players can learn about the boss fights. For Origin, it is an essential component to prepare for new raiding content. These sociotechnical systems are, therefore, both dialogical and virtual. In this context, the sociotechnical systems at play are both dialogical and performative. The guild's raid preparation and execution emerge through a complex interrelationship between affect, technology, and collective practice. These entangled forces shape individual gameplay experiences and constitute the shared sociotechnical lifeworlds that define *WoW* raiding communities.

[00:14-00:27] In the background, four raiders were marked by a boss ability called Gluttonous Miasma, a 24-second-long debuff that takes away health from the afflicted player's toon and can only be healed to full health with the help of other players standing in range of the affected player. The raiders were all designated to certain groups that were marked on the ground by the raid leader–a purple diamond, an orange circle, a green triangle, and a yellow star. Each person, usually one per designated group, is marked with Miasma and must stand on a designated marker so that other players may help with the mechanic. The boss unleashed Volatile Ejection, a laser that points to three players who must run out of the way of their fellow raiders and avoid the laser's area of effect before Hungering Destroyer fully casts it. Otherwise, Volatile Ejection will instantly kill the afflicted player's toon or others who stand in it.

As miasma and volatile ejection mechanics float across Farid's screen, I watched Farid and his teammates on Twitch. They engaged with one another over Discord and in the virtual game, so that they could choreograph fight mechanics to eliminate the boss. These mechanics created an affective atmosphere where raiders must maintain constant awareness of their positioning and others' states. The 24-second Miasma debuff felt like a temporal lifeworld where players' actions are synchronized through technical necessity, as well as physical and vocal coordination. The designated markers (purple diamond, orange circle, green triangle, yellow star) create observation apparatuses wherein material-discursive practices not only measure but actively constitute the raid's reality. The markers are not just visual aids but are entangled with players' movements, decisions, and collective performance.

The sociotechnical system of *WoW* requires communication platforms. The players in a raid team, known as raiders, must have in-depth knowledge of raiding and efficient communication to complete objectives, especially if they want to be competitive against other guilds in their home country or the world. Like other raiders, Farid understands the mechanics of each boss fight and has prior knowledge of how to play his class. In a raid, there are three different types of players. Most of the players help the team by cleaving down the boss's health, which is called damaging the boss. These players are often colloquially referred to as DPS (damage per second) for their massive amount of damage output. DPS is both a noun and an adjective. A 20-man raid team will typically have 12-14 DPS classes. Any team will also consist of healing classes, which will make up 4-6 players. Healers primarily focus on healing other players but often do slight damage to the boss as it is helpful, especially when confronting challenging new fights.

Then, finally, there are tanks, and any raid team will almost always have 2, with the very rare occurrence of 3. Raiders pick their class and specializations through a menu. A player can change these settings in a safe non-combat zone, such as a resting area like an inn. Not every class can be a tank specialization. Tanks maintain the boss's attention, otherwise known colloquially as aggravation or aggro by gamers, as tank classes have more armor durability and health. All these classes are varied by their spell casting: other ranged or melee damaging abilities, what types of armor they can wear, and what types of weapons they can wield. As mentioned before, Farid plays a mage, which is a spellcaster class. Farid must navigate multiple systems, including a complex social system that reflects a form of cultural navigation, where technical expertise intersects with social positioning and technical-cultural lifeworld. In this way, gameplay becomes a site of complex technical and cultural entanglements.

Further into the Hungering Destroyer fight:

[00:28] Farid, remaining calm, went through his fire mage rotation, his toon's predetermined spells cast in order and combination that are bound to keys on the keyboard. He previously told me that his keybinds–meaning his assigned combination of keys to keyboard commands–are pretty standard and are as follows:

-main filler ability on 2
-rotational abilities on 1, 3, 4, r, e, tilde
-cooldowns on shift+1 through shift+4
-interrupt on f
-movement abilities bound to middle mouse button or shift+middle mouse button
-defensive abilities on q, shift+q, 5, shift+5

He had explained earlier that this is the general framework for mapping cooldowns (cds), or in other words, timing spells based on a waiting period, which allows him to play other classes besides his mage with ease in his spare time. Farid's keys lit up on his screen, indicating that they are ready to be pressed, which is an in-game feature.

A raid team must have at least one raid leader, usually a tank class, to function cohesively. The raid leader will make the majority of the callouts for the other players so they know what mechanics are coming. Teams that do not have callouts by a raid leader often perform poorly and act less cohesively as a unit. To act cohesively, Farid and his teammates communicate constantly throughout the boss fights. To perform well during the boss fights, like other raiding guilds, Origin is run by the guild leader named Anjir, an individual in charge of all the players, and has assistance from a raider leader. The guild leader will typically delegate to officers so that mundane tasks are completed. The raid leader is typically an officer and will be one of a few officers who assist with disseminating information on defeating bosses before raid night. Officers are merely higher-ranked players in a guild who are given tasks by the guild leader and are often more connected to the guild leader.

In Origin, there is a convergence of modalities and multiple cultures that contour the basic structure of the guild: Iranian, Albanian, Chinese, Vietnamese, and more, living across Canada and the US. As a multi-ethnic group acting together in a sociotechnical system, Farid and

the guild create interpersonal lifeworlds for themselves entangled with real-world meaning through hearing and speaking to one another, others knowing each other in "real life," and of course, having the option to connect with others outside the guild while watching Farid's Twitch streams. Through this complex affective landscape, Origin acts together as a cohesive unit, which is vital to developing a competitive gaming ecology because of the fast pace and challenging nature of mythic-level raiding. In other words, competitiveness is essential to this guild.

The discourse within gaming communities on what constitutes competitive gaming is often called into question for divergent reasons. This chapter does not seek to create a dichotomy between social versus competitive players nor what constitutes casual versus hardcore players. But it does call into question the often-misogynistic stereotypes of female gamers. I, therefore, look to Iranian and Iranian American women gamers who want to play *WoW* but cannot play the game as lifeworlds transgressed or fully realized, either due to gender and/or access issues like sanctions. While gamers who are women are underrepresented in Farid's guild, I engage with Farid and the information he presents as a means of showing a community engaged in online and offline affective landscape evolving through and beside a reality "riddled with tensions" (Binswanger & Zimmerman 2018: 107). The cultural significance of Farid's experience can be established as he realizes it, and I perceive it as an ethnographer.

Farid remains relatively calm and nonchalant during the Hungering Destroyer fight. His expressed demeanor, or affect, speaks to a highly skilled raider and that of someone playing a DPS role. Other raiders were more audibly entangled at the moment through their expressive nature, likely due to their role and the need to remain hyper-focused on the mechanics. The Raid Leader, playing as the lead tank, also consciously made callouts for mechanics with exacting

precision. None of the Raider Leader's words were minced, as it is imperative to be as clear as possible when communicating with the team so that they may achieve their common goal. As Golub argues, raid teams commit themselves to the raid rather than immersing themselves in something they feel is real or a place (2010: 19).

While there needs to be a level of immersion, or rather, paying attention to the in-game surroundings, the project requires multiple modalities to accomplish the task. In other words, for the sociotechnical project of competitive gaming to even function, players must gather data outside the system, as suggested by Farid's perspective. For instance, Farid stated that he must "spend a lot of time at the beginning of the tier thinking about the best strategy that our guild can handle" because preparation is integral to the leadership core and to calling out important events in the game. When applying Golub's understanding of virtual worlds like *WoW* to Farid's experience as a gamer, it becomes clear that there are "lifeworld contexts" that permeate beyond being in-game (2010: 24). In Origin, clear communication with each other is vital to achieving the goals from top-down structures. Origin is not a female-friendly guild. By analyzing Farid's lifeworld as he experiences it, I think it is important to reflect on his view that gender bias is not okay, and as I shared earlier, that sexual harassment or misconduct like in the case of Afrasiabi was viewed negatively. Having known Farid for years, I can attest to his humility and kindness; however, he was unaware of the blatant misogyny.

WoW is more than just a hobby because it integrates complex social, economic, and skill-building elements into an engaging, long-term pursuit. Afterall, Origin has existed since 2004 and continues to exist to this day in 2025 as a top 10 guild in the world. It goes beyond personal progress; it is the community, leadership, and skills that position the game as a profound contributor to players' personal and professional lives. Like Chinese gaming

communities where sociality and team cooperation drive participation (with 16 out of 24 players citing it as their primary motivation), high-end *WoW* guilds thrive on deep social bonds and collaborative achievement. It goes beyond personal progress; it is the community, leadership, and skills that position the game as a profound contributor to players' personal and professional lives. This mirrors the "dual hybridity" seen in Chinese gaming, where players blend global game mechanics with local cultural practices to create unique community dynamics. In Chinese gaming, players create meaning through interaction and thus become 'gamers as producers' and also "fulfil their desires and seek pleasure, becoming 'gamers as subjects'" (Yoon and Cheon 2014).

However, these gaming spaces reflect broader cultural challenges. Origin only had an average of 2-3 female gamers at any given time in their guild and currently has none. In massive multiplayer online games, women's participation tends to be low. Just like in the US and Iran, Brazilian gamers also face harassment and discrimination during game play, wherein men treat the opportunity of meeting women gamers like a Tinder dating opportunity, and then these men retaliate when faced with rejection (Silva et al. 2023: 296-297). And just as women in the US, Iran, and Brazil face harassment where their interactions are reduced to dating opportunities underpinned by retaliatory behaviors, even eSports players in China constantly battle sexism, with female professionals' skills going under-recognized.[107]

Mahdi and Women Gamers in Iran

Structures of power and symbolic politics proliferate in guilds. In this section, I will directly address Mahdi's sociotechnical lifeworld in juxtaposition to Farid's experience. Within

[107] "Chinese eSports players battle sexism." 2025. Inside the Games. https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1151253/chinese-esport-players-sexism-compite.

Mahdi's sociotechnical lifeworld, he experiences enriched interconnectedness like collaborative action in urgent conditions. Mahdi is a 32-year-old who lives in Tehran. I met him online through my network on *WoW*. He plays video games nearly fifteen hours a week. More than just a hobby, Mahdi loves to immerse himself in online games with his friends. Since he has challenges playing *WoW*, he spends most of his time playing *DOTA 2* with other Iranian friends around the same age.

Digital Ethnographic Fieldnotes. February 2021. I messaged Mahdi on Discord to discuss more about the games he is playing and the video games he used to play.

Mahdi: I am playing DOTA 2 a lot more lately. World of Warcraft has to be too expensive, and the embargo does not help. Connecting to the game was also impossible.

Me: Are you having any trouble connecting to DOTA 2?

Mahdi: It even costs so much to play that game! Easily over a few hundred Toman for a battle pass. I had to buy a Steam card through a 3rd party to even purchase the battle pass. I need a few different VPNs to change my IP address so that I can play in the first place. I feel like there was little hope for improvements because of sanctions.

Me: Interesting. So, what brings you to DOTA 2 then, if the challenges keep presenting themselves?

Mahdi: I have been playing it since 2013. Even though I prefer to raid with a guild in WoW because I get to play with more friends, I find that DOTA 2 has a fun dynamic and shorter bursts of gameplay.

The sociotechnical lifeworld of Mahdi can be seen as reminiscent of a "non-movement" as his everyday practices and interactions in digital spaces are emblematic of a form of resistance and identity formation (Bayat 2009). While US sanctions and information controls in Iran prevent full access, especially to *WoW*, Mahdi finds a way to enjoy games with friends by building out an enclave of players from an Iranian networked public (Papacharissi 2010). In Mahdi's experience, where public spaces are often surveilled, the digital realm offers a unique

avenue for expression and community building. In other words, online communities can build on both weak and strong ties, evident in cases of cyber activism such as during the Arab Spring (Kharroub 2015). Even so, revolutions can occur without revolutionary ideas but through the pursuit of feeling, wherein life becomes politics (Bayat 2009). In other words, through ordinary actions, one can seemingly set the stage for political agency in times of constraint.

DOTA 2 requires only a group of five players who battle an entirely different group of five players known as 5v5. A match can last 30-45 minutes, whereas *WoW* raiding consists of 3-4 hours a day, a few or several days a week depending on the guild. This temporal structure shows how sustained engagement creates pockets of resistance and community formation outside state surveillance. Mahdi also said, "While *DOTA 2* has grown significantly popular in Iran, with competitive players in the DPC WEU [Western Europe Division 1], I miss raiding in a progressive guild. It is just not the same kind of experience." The distinction between *DOTA 2's* competitive environment and *WoW*'s guild structure highlights different forms of digital resistance and community building. While Mahdi has never led his former guild in a raid, he enjoyed learning new skills as his guild progressed, which took the form of discussing strategies amongst players. This collaborative learning environment exemplifies soft resistance in online spaces where citizens can develop leadership skills and social capital outside traditional hierarchies by building on weak ties. Beyond Iran, Chinese gamers also flock to MMORPGs, and these types of voluntary social networks also lead to bonding, as well as the negotiation of their identity, which challenges prevailing stereotypes about Chinese gamers being isolated or disengaged from broader social processes, instead portraying them as actively involved in shaping and expressing a multifaceted cultural identity within a rapidly modernizing society (Zhong 2011).

While Mahdi has never led his former guild in a raid, he enjoyed learning new skills as his guild progressed, which took the form of discussing strategies amongst players. Because of consistent scheduling, Mahdi found that guild raids provided a tight-knit feel among a larger group of players, while *DOTA 2* does not require the same level of familiarity. He told me he mostly plays with a few people he knows from his *WoW* days but occasionally plays random players. Mahdi says that *DOTA 2* can be a toxic environment, much like *League of Legends*, due to the lack of moderation in the environment. Multiplayer Online Battle Arena Video Games (MOBAs) like *DOTA 2* are extremely competitive in a way that produces gamers who like to troll or "flame" one another, even if the player is highly ranked. Mahdi also said that such players aim to be cruel online, which is why it is important to play with friends. The toxic environment Mahdi describes in *DOTA 2* contrasts with *WoW's* controlled guild structure, reflecting broader tensions in digital Middle Eastern spaces between unregulated interaction and community-governed spaces. His preference for playing with friends rather than random players mirrors patterns of trust networks that emerge in response to digital surveillance and social control.

Digital Ethnographic Fieldnotes. April 2021. I message Mahdi on Discord about some video games like Prince of Persia and others made in the West. I wonder what he thinks of WoW and other games' reliance on Persian culture.

Me: Do you see this as cultural appropriation?

Mahdi: I think we Iranians tend to influence video game content or take part in video game creation. Sometimes, it feels like a flattening of the Iranian experience.

Me: Can you tell me more about how Iranian culture may have influenced a game like WoW?

Mahdi: The Elvish towns remind me of places I visited as a kid in Iran, like Silvermoon City and Suramar with dome buildings. These were so similar to places like Jamkaran Mosque in Qom.

And sometimes language was similar, like when Night Elves say phrases like "Ishnu-alah," which was like Inshallah almost.

Mahdi's observations about Persian cultural elements in *WoW* illuminate several key theoretical frameworks in Middle Eastern digital studies. His lived experience navigating these digital spaces exemplifies affective infrastructures where cultural symbols become embedded in virtual architectures, creating emotional resonance for players from the represented cultures. Recognizing familiar architectural elements (like the Jamkaran Mosque echoed in Silvermoon City) demonstrates a digital nostalgia where Middle Eastern players experience their cultural heritage through Western gaming interpretations. This creates an affective feedback loop between cultural memory and digital representation and a hybrid digital lifeworld where cultural authenticity and commercial representation constantly negotiate. This hybridity of digital space can be seen with the linguistic appropriation of "Ishnu-alah" to its progenitor, "Inshallah." At the same time, emotional and cultural resonance is created through linguistic approximation, even as it potentially diminishes the original cultural significance.

When spaces invoke an architectural memory, players like Mahdi become aware of the co-constitutive nature of games between the game's affective infrastructure and the conscious choices made in the game. In other words, a player's unconsciousness, subconsciousness, and consciousness are mutually co-constitutive and formed through one another by choice and variables controlled outside of the individual. Therefore, the realm of consciousness is informed by affective spheres through interconnected lived experiences, including habitus, choice, and gender. Affective consciousness exists beyond merely the pre-personal, but as an ability of adults to perceive their affective experience, express it, and adequately describe it. In other words, semiosis and affect are intertwined to contain yet go beyond the production of space, place, and

atmospheres. In addition, affect consists of engagement patterns entangled with making meaning and embodied change, articulating and traveling through bodies.

Iranian lifeworlds are not reducible to a singular subjective experience or narrative. Indeed, state actors and everyday ordinary people inhabit experiences through their conscious choices rather than a pre-personal intensity, whether in a massive-multiplayer online game or in "real life." Do not get me wrong; these experiences are in-game, out-of-game, and in-between: intense affective experiences, landscapes, and (social) atmospheres. Affect here denotes the online and offline assemblage engaged through conscious choice. Affect, therefore, cannot merely be a pre-personal phenomenon or a passage of emotions through the body outside of consciousness. Many affect theorists, unfortunately, have fallen into this intellectual pothole because they rely on the Cartesian idea of human understanding This perspective positions affect to consist of "representations built from primitive, disembodied, context-free facts, elements, or features" predicated on "explicit rules or instructions for manipulating those facts or elements or features" through deterministic reality (Leys 2017: 197). Gamers like Mahdi understand the predetermined rules or laws that seek to define their lives, reduce their agency, and deny their will to live more freely. Such a terrain would make experiences like Mahdi's impossible. But despite that, Mahdi challenges coercive state power and insidious economic sanctions by playing games.

At the intersection of social embeddedness and somatically embodied affective cognition, subjects become intertwined with the everyday and the political. This affective entanglement of the everyday and the political collapses, and sometimes the moment exceeds logic or reason and sense-making. It becomes a deliberate display or conscious action (Protevi 2009: 54). Gamergate serves as a powerful example of affective entanglement in gaming culture. What began as

harassment targeting female game developers rapidly evolved into an intense movement where everyday gaming discussions became inseparable from political discourse. Players specifically flooded discussion spaces, from Steam forums to blog sites like Kotaku and Twitter, to flood feminist games and gamers with misogynistic content. In the case of Iranian gamers, Mariam put it well: "I used to stay quiet in games, never using voice chat. Now I deliberately speak up in *DOTA 2* and take charge of groups, even when I know the harassment is coming. Each time I turn on my mic or make a call, it's not just playing anymore, it's a conscious choice to be heard, to take up space where they don't want me to exist."

As Iranian gamers adapt to the moment, they display behavioral patterns through cultural displays. This chapter lacks a fully disclosed affective experience of all Iranians who play *WoW*. Rather, I share vignettes of experiences sutured together with the best surgical precision that one can muster as an outsider to Iran. Farid and Mahdi are my prime examples of the embodiment of *WoW* raiders at the intersection of culture and affect. I illuminate what it means for some individuals to be Iranian in cultural and historical contexts. This analysis explores how individuals and groups intentionally create shared online spaces (intersubjective lifeworlds) where they connect and interact while also experiencing the emotional tone or mood (affective atmospheres) that these spaces evoke. In this chapter, I particularly gesture to the human experience of Iranian intersubjectivity by employing the concept of "interior and exterior realms of affect to make sense" of my participants' experiences (Osanloo 2020: 9). The emotional force field that permeates Iranian experiences online interlinks "ideas and passions, moral norms and ethical dilemmas, the tried and true, as well as the unprecedented, a field charged with vitality" (Jackson 2013: 7).

Online games afford Iranians transnational interconnections to socialize with others. As such, *WoW* can be used by players to create a social outlet for users across the globe, encouraging them to create communities together known as guilds to counter powerful opponents in the game. Traditional forms of socializing span the here and the now with newer phenomenologies that are tangible despite the elusive nature of online worlds. Therefore, socialization amongst humans has necessitated the use of modes of technology that have permeated space and time –the printing press, letter writing, tabletop games, and the public sphere. I found digital networking in online games to be more than an enjoyable pastime but a truly unique and immersive standard for socializing amongst gamers. It produces excitement and belonging and gives the utmost pleasure to the player. Women and men in Iran engage in these endeavors with one another despite potential mitigation tactics by authorities to access online games, whether that is due to the Iranian government or US sanctions protocols.

While lives can be replicated to an extent in virtual worlds, *WoW* is particularly different because of its emphasis on war and factions. Yet, *WoW* offers similar ways to socialize and connect that are just as immersive as other virtual games. *WoW* also differs from other game genres, such as first-person shooters, which rely heavily on armed combat, as *WoW* only has abstract levels of violence (Nardi 2010). For instance, some players will see death in a more personal and embodied way because it feels more realistic in a first-person shooter. *WoW*'s violence, on the other hand, is cartoonish and therefore abstraction. In essence, its residents, or rather players, are predisposed to the fractal and frictional nature of the game. Through virtual world socializing, gamers in *WoW* discover themselves through everyday experiences while interacting with others in-game.

Growing up, many women gamers describe how they would play console games at home, sometimes with their siblings. As video game technology changed, gaming environments grew tenfold to include global interconnectedness. In many ways, gaming reflects everyday life, including politics. So, why do gamers, particularly men, create a toxic environment for their female counterparts? If games are a hostile environment for women, why do we still play, especially if the negative political onslaught toward women seeps into everyday life?

Digital Ethnographic Fieldnotes. December 2021. I met with Azar and Mariam on Discord voice to chat with them about growing up as gamers and Gamergate.

Azar: Growing up as a gamer in Iran, there were many limitations such as being a woman, the type of games available because of the government or sanctions, etc.

Mariam: Same. And the games we did get to play were smuggled in or copied. We didn't have original versions. I would spend all day playing with my friends at an Internet café.

Azar: Yeah, exactly. Then by the late 2000s, the government began cracking down on us going to the Internet cafes for not wearing proper hijab.

Me: So, basically you guys weren't welcome because you were women.

Mariam: Precisely.

Me: Were you guys impacted by Gamergate? Like doxxing, trolls, etc. who make your life hell for still playing?

Azar: I think we had our own toxic culture here in Iran, but online trolls were cross-cultural.

Azar and Mariam's experiences as women gamers in Iran highlight the intersection of gender, digital spaces, and societal constraints. Azar's comment about limitations due to government sanctions and misogyny signifies barriers for women. Mariam's recollection of playing smuggled or copied games at Internet cafes reflects digital cultural production in constrained environments, despite sanctions and censorship limiting access to original content. The crackdown on Internet cafes for improper hijab, as mentioned by Azar, exemplifies women

navigating and resisting societal restrictions through everyday practices. These narratives also resonate with broader regional dynamics, such as the Iranian Green Movement and the Arab Spring. The Green Movement influenced the Arab Spring, emphasizing shared methods of resistance and digital mobilization. Similarly, Arab Spring's regional impact created ripples in Iran, where the regime responded with heightened surveillance and crackdowns on dissent. These parallels show the importance of interconnectedness during digital resistance movements in the Middle East, where women like Azar and Mariam navigate local and global challenges in pursuing digital participation. As mentioned by Azar, the crackdown on Internet cafes for improper hijab exemplifies quiet encroachment where women navigate and resist societal restrictions through everyday practices. Women often face additional scrutiny in public digital spaces, like cross-cultural online trolls, and community is built through shared experiences of harassment.

My conversation with Azar and Mariam touched on Gamergate. Gamergate began as a harassment campaign in 2012 for a supposed call for ethics in journalism. In reality, #gamergate was an online harassment campaign that centered itself on anti-women activity in video game culture. Alt-right gamers were doxxing women developers in the industry, leaking their personal information and threatening their lives by organizing across online spaces like Twitter and 4Chan. The right-wing backlash posited that there is an innate "gamer identity" and that the "social justice warriors" were a threat to the video game industry. Arguably, gamergaters are one of several right-wing movements that helped bolster Donald Trump into the presidency in 2016 and influenced the US Capitol insurrection on January 6th, 2021. The theater of chaos and violent attack against the 117th United States Congress to "rightfully" install Trump into a second term of presidency had antecedents in Gamergate and the alt-right movement. Fortunately, the

destructive attempt to block Congress from confirming Joe Biden's presidency was ineffectual. However, women gamers and game industry professionals generally, and more specifically Iranian and Iranian American women, face negative consequences while such sentiments proliferate. Despite FBI evidence suggesting that this attack had little to no coordination, conspiracy theories and incendiary speeches during a Trump rally indicate that coordination is not at the heart of the problem but rather shared sentiments across a dispersed number of alt-right thinkers.

Neither Gamergate nor alt-right sentiments have gone away in the US. I originally posited that Gamergate would have a resurgence, but Gamergate sentiments continue to proliferate in online environments and the game industry itself. During the election cycle and Capitol insurrection, *WoW* in-game trade chats bustled with discontented alt-right Trump supporters and trolls who baited these supporters into hate speech. After the Capitol insurrection, some spaces like Twitch attempted to ameliorate the issue by replacing "PogChamp" emote with a Komodo dragon in place of one based on the personality Ryan "Gootecks" Gutieerez, who called the death of Ashli Babbitt a #MAGAMartyr. The video game community in Iran and the US continues to use the concept across other platforms despite Gootecks now being described as a white supremacy meme. The 2013-2021 Iranian President Hassan Rouhani called the violent insurrection an instance that broadly exposes the fragility of democracy among Iranian gamers. Some relayed during interviews how banning Trump due to the insurrection was keeping with democracy. In contrast, others focused on the Iranian parliament's desire to sanction Trump for assassinating General Qassem Soleimani on January 3rd, 2020, a year before the Capitol insurrection.

Meanwhile, Iranian American women gamers trumpeted their exhilaration when Trump was banned from Twitter and other social media yet lamented his not being impeached. I mentioned the above information to Azar and Mariam. Specifically, I highlighted the overlap between geopolitics and the sentiments of male citizens in the US and globally. Mariam said, "Doesn't surprise me."

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated that gender dynamics in *World of Warcraft* extend beyond mere gameplay, shaping both the digital and real-world experiences of its players. The persistent gender imbalance, where female participation often plummets to as low as 10–12%, creates an environment that reinforces male-centric norms and expectations. As evidenced by the pervasive instances of cyberbullying and misogyny, female gamers face systemic harassment that forces many to either conceal their identities or seek refuge in women-only groups. By unpacking specific in-game encounters and community interactions, I revealed how traditional masculine ideals are both embedded in the game's design and reproduced within its social fabric. For instance, guilds and leadership roles consistently echo a male-dominated power structure, as illustrated by characters like Farid, who navigate a space where sexism and gatekeeping are common. The conflict between individual identity and institutionalized gender norms not only undermines the inclusivity of the community but also impacts the guild's cohesion and performance.

My detailed analysis of gameplay mechanics—previously exemplified by coordinated raids and complex team dynamics—shows that these activities are far from neutral. They serve as cases for contesting gender roles, where technical prowess and community resilience become acts of both cultural affirmation and resistance. The stakes in these environments are significant:

successful guild leadership and community building depend on challenging the status quo and fostering an equitable space for all members despite entrenched biases. In reconfiguring the narrative around *WoW*, this chapter emphasizes the urgent need for reimagining community structures and designing platforms that not only recognize but actively dismantle misogynistic practices.

Chapter 6

Tactical Frivolity and Digital Resistance: Turban Tossing in the Woman Life Freedom Movement

Introduction

Political resistance has transformed dramatically in an era defined by the pervasive influence of digital media and networked communications. A digital insurgency increasingly complements traditional protests conducted in streets and public squares. Here, humor is not a mere escape from hardship but a fully formed tactic of dissent. As seen in the Woman Life Freedom movement's viral meme culture, tactical frivolity has become a powerful "weapon of the weak," a mode of protest that fuses feminist perspectives, cultural critique, and playful resistance against oppressive regimes. This chapter brings together insights from an array of sources on meme culture analysis of political jokes that emphasize memes as a strategic, subversive tool rather than mere entertainment. Drawing upon ethnographic fieldnotes, meme examples, and critical theoretical perspectives, I offer a reconstruction of protest to showcase the inherent power of humor as both a cultural and political tool. I show that the practice of turban tossing (*ammame parani*) and its memes within this movement mark a transformative moment in contemporary protest strategies. These memes directly connect to gaming communities as a form of digital resistance through meme production and spread. Thus, I argue that gamers are key to satirizing political violence and dissent online, thereby pushing the movement's agenda.

Gaming communities' expertise in creating and rapidly disseminating memes transformed turban tossing from a physical act of protest into a powerful digital resistance tool. Their technical skills, platform knowledge, and established networks amplified these protest memes across social media, particularly through platforms like Discord where gaming and protest

communities overlap. Iranian gamers' circulation of memes thus embodies resistance. Although spreading memes seems like a simple gesture of defiance, it amplifies digital networks and has evolved into powerful tools for political resistance and social change. For better or worse, gamers set political and cultural trends, whether that be in the US alt-right manosphere, or in the case of Iran, engaging with online communities and meme virality, suggesting more than a hobby but rather a social phenomenon with positive and deleterious societal effects. While a few participants directly engaged in turban tossing, the phenomenon quickly became a well-known symbol of resistance and was celebrated among them. Alongside these acts, memes played a crucial role as tactics, sources of humor, and inspirations born from the digital witnessing we shared between protest participants and me throughout 2022-2023.

Gamer communities are a significant circulator of memes during the movement, showing social and political dynamics within technical systems. This chapter therefore demonstrates that the act of turban tossing (*ammame parani*) and its associated memes play a central part of gamer discourse. Iranian gamers, known for their technical skills and rapid meme production, have repurposed their expertise to subvert political violence. For instance, when a video of turban tossing circulated online, gamers on platforms like Discord quickly created variations that incorporated visual cues from popular games such as *Counter-Strike* and *Among Us*. These adaptations not only reframe the act of dissent but also amplify the movement's agenda through familiar gaming aesthetics and humor. By leveraging digital literacy and established online networks, gamers turn protest into a dynamic, interactive medium—reshaping how resistance is expressed and mobilized in the digital age. This connection, where the tactics of gaming directly inform protest strategies, underscores the critical role of digital communities in modern political

activism. Throughout this chapter, I set the stage to explain the virality of memes and the history of turban tossing. Thereafter, I share memes of turban tossing as means of tactical frivolity.

Setting the Stage

As gamer culture has evolved, meme culture has also adapted, incorporating in-jokes, lore, and popular trends, thereby fostering community rapport. In part, the rapid and viral circulation of memes on platforms like Reddit and Discord accelerates trend formation, facilitates real-time discussions, and shapes opinions beyond the gaming ecosystem. In the Iranian gamer community, turban tossing became a focal point to embody a playful yet powerful form of subversion, merging cultural critique with digital camaraderie to challenge authoritarian norms and inspire collective resistance. Turban-tossing memes create a common language that reinforces a sense of belonging through shared cultural references, and at the same time, rupturing "unyielding presentations of a singular" (Mina 2014; Amrute 2019: 69). Iranian gamers' meme circulation exposes underlying tensions and creative responses when established systems falter by challenging the government's control over narratives. By critically analyzing the significant influence of the IRI in shaping the social, technical, and ecological realities, memes serve as humor and parody as deliberate weapons against authoritarian narratives.

Digital Ethnographic Fieldnote. October 8-9, 2022. There had been ongoing massive protests in the streets of major cities in Iran, marking the cascade of the Woman Life Freedom movement, and a pivotal moment in my ethnographic fieldwork. Like most days of observation, I was at my desk when Farid, a participant witnessing from afar, shared his perspective on the mounting protests. Our conversation through Discord exemplified how contemporary movements manifest through screens and shared digital artifacts. "I've talked to my parents about the situation a lot," Farid explained, highlighting how the government's religious orthodoxy had contributed to "the slow decline in Iran." Days prior, I shared protest-related memes with him. He then responded, "Damn, straight craziness." Farid's response captured the visceral impact of witnessing political upheaval through digital means. Reflecting on our exchanges, his response showed a key dynamic I observed throughout my research: how digital witnessing transforms the

ethnographer's and participants' relationship to political events. Far from just being mere Internet humor, memes have emerged as integral vehicles for processing and sharing political commentary. They served as entry points for deeper discussions about authoritarianism, resistance, and social change among Iranians in and outside of Iran. When Farid expressed uncertainty about what could "be done to actually result in real change," his words reflected a broader tension I also encountered repeatedly, the gap between digital expression and material transformation. As an ethnographer, I found myself not just observing but participating in these circuits of digital witnessing.

The act of sharing memes with participants became a form of co-witnessing, where we collectively processed events through digital artifacts that blend humor, critique, and political commentary. For some participants like Farid, these moments of sharing created spaces for participants to articulate their relationships to distant yet emotionally proximate political struggles. The practice of collecting and discussing memes with participants also reveals how digital culture enables new forms of political engagement and meaning-making, particularly in contexts where geographic or political constraints might limit direct action. Iranian gaming communities have emerged as a particularly vibrant site of resistance in this digital landscape. Gamers have leveraged their cultural capital and wit to engage tactical frivolity—using humorous tactics as part of collective action against authority figures (Tilly 1986). Although memes are a newer phenomenon in and outside of gamer culture, turban tossing is not new in Iran.

In 1909, Yusuf-Khan took Shaykh Fazl Allah Nuri's turban and threw it to a crowd of protestors. He was hanged for "sowing corruption and sedition on earth," according to the Revolutionary Tribunal, because he issued religious decrees (fatwas) for followers to spill the blood of parliamentary leaders, whom he perceived as "apostates," "atheists," and "secret Babis" (Abrahamian 1999: 24). This incident exemplifies the complex relationship between religious authority and political dissent in early modern Iran, particularly during the Constitutional

Revolution period (Keddie 2003: 67; Martin 1989: 50-52). Yusuf-Khan's actions in 1909 led to severe consequences for those labeled subversives; contemporary protestors are similarly destined to face harsh repercussions if they continue their disruptive behavior. Today, some clerics and news articles outright condemn the protestors' use of *ammame parani*.[108] For instance, Iranian state media, such as Kayhan, have reported on these events, framing them within the context of national security and social order, while also emphasizing the government's stance against what they perceive as foreign influence inciting unrest and critiquing modern deviations from enduring traditionalist values.[109]

Women organizing and protesting for their rights in Iran is nothing new. During the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-11, women were pivotal in mobilizing others by advocating for the rights to education, political participation, and work while challenging the status quo of traditional gendered norms. Ideological systems and upheaval marked this period, yet at the same time, women were able to establish organizations that improved the status of women. For instance, Bibi Maryam Bakhtiari, who assisted in guerrilla forces during the constitutional revolution, pushed for women's rights, whereas others like Bibi Khanoom Astarabadi founded a school for girls. Bibi Khanoom wrote a rebuttal pamphlet titled "Gentlemen's Imperfections" in response to a patriarchal text called "The Discipling of Women," one that served as a satirical yet chauvinistic point of view towards women. While women fought for their rights with the pen and

[108]Ansar, Hadi. 2022. "A historical experience of turban-wearing in Iran." Khabar Online. https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1693963/%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C%D8%AE%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%87-%D9%BE%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86

[109] Soleimani, Alireza. 2022. "What sacred propositions does the chameleon satirize?" Khayan. https://kayhan.ir/fa/news/256556/%D8%A2%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A8%E2%80%8C%D9%BE%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%AA-%DA%86%D9%87-%DA%AF%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%AF%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D8%B1%D8%A7-%D9%87%D8%AC%D9%88-%D9%85%DB%8C%E2%80%8C%DA%A9%D9%86%D8%AF%C2%A0

through organizations, Shaykh Fazlallah Nuri paved the way for the politicization of clergy, affording momentum in the latter part of the century, culminating in the 1979 Revolution with threads of thought that can be attributed to Nuri present in the IRI. For Nuri, Islam is based on obedience, not freedom or equality, a pivotal issue for the Constitutionalists who sought more of an egalitarian and secular government (Sullivan 1998: 220). As a jurist, Nuri argued for a constitutionalism that included sharia, also known as *mashruta mashru'a*, which was not implemented, but some of Nuri's ideas were noted by Ayatollah Khomeini (Arjomand 2000).

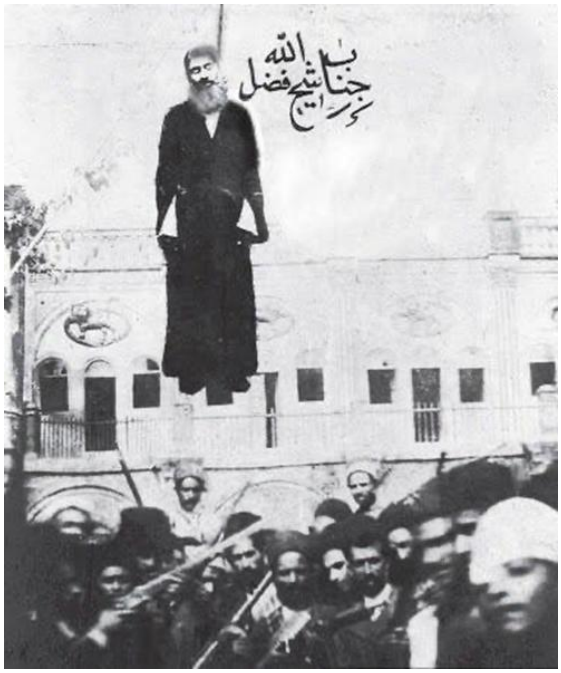


Figure 6.1. Shaykh Fazlallah Nuri was hanged before a crowd in Cannon Square.

Digital Resistance: Tactical Frivolity and Memes

Digital Ethnography Fieldnotes. November 2022. That autumn evening, as I scrolled through my social media feeds, I was documenting the evolving dynamics between clerics and protesters across Iran. A meme depicting a cleric's turban with a helmet strap circulated widely—each share an act of subtle defiance. The comments section on various discussion boards, Twitter, etc., buzzed with debates about whether turban tossing constituted rebellion or war, with one

user noting poignantly: "People have been killed for less. Any resistance is better than turning a cheek." At the time, people in the streets of Tehran were disrupting clerics' daily routines through the calculated risk of knocking off turbans. Mahdi noted, "Mullah's be like :-O." In other words, clerics' plastered faces on memes and video content had an expression of surprise. Participants also talked about the slogan "Bullets, Tanks, and Rockets – the Mullahs can bugger off!" that apparently echoed through various neighborhoods, as a rhythm carrying the weight of decades of accumulated grievances. A tweet by Reza Hajipour captured the ironic role reversal: "Think about the mullahs' hesitation to wear mullah's clothing before leaving the house... They are finally experiencing the atmosphere of fear and terror that has been created for the girls of this land for 40 years."[110] *This period marked what many considered "the worst times for clerics before and after the Islamic Revolution." Many participants also saw the symbolic act of turban-tossing as a transformative act and a recognized form of protest, so each discarded turban represented not just an insult, but a deliberate unraveling of the authority's visible symbols during the Woman Life Freedom Movement. When sharing these sentiments with Mariam and Azar, she said, "Mockery is necessary. It would be like if you were knocking off a MAGA hat." Azar replied, "Yeah, except a MAGA may shoot you." Mariam then stated, "But we also have the Basij."*

Humor in gamer contexts may be a safety valve that allows dissenters to criticize oppressive regimes indirectly. But shared humor like turban-tossing memes and videos is enjoyed and made possible through pre-existing collective identity (Hart 2007: 17). Gamers have a deep emotional connection through collaborative gaming and intimate friendship. Through shared culture, language, and thus humor, Mariam and Azar's exchange reveals a sophisticated understanding of risk and resistance by comparing MAGA hat removal to turban tossing, while acknowledging that both acts carry real dangers from armed supporters (whether MAGA followers or the Basij militia). Their dialogue demonstrates how shared political humor enables protesters to name and navigate very real threats of violence while maintaining solidarity. Mariam and Azar were aware of potential "material risks of arrest, murder, and imprisonment" through their sharing of memes and expressions of dissent (Khosravi-Ooryad 2024: 984). Although memes may seem like minimal effort to mitigate the state's repressive apparatus, they

[110] "Protests in Iran: When did "turban-tossing" movement begin?" 2022. BBC. https://www.bbc.com/persian/articles/c0302x8335zo.

reinforce a collective identity among protestors and thus serve as powerful symbols of resistance worth any perceived risk by participants desiring shared laughter and cultural bonding. Thus, memes are one act of tactical frivolity that helps collective action fortify group identity, which makes every act of defiance a unifying statement against repression.

Figure 6.2 captures a decisive moment of defiance that is captured in many images, memes, and videos that my participants spoke about. Each frame depicts the shocked expression from a cleric, exemplifying the urgency of a community rebelling against imposed restrictions. In a single, bold gesture, the act of knocking off the turban transcends the physical and becomes a symbol of liberation and resistance. It is as if that moment encapsulates years of pent-up frustration and a burning desire for freedom.

Figure 6.2. A man knocks off a Mullah's turban and runs away. This image is from a video widely shared on Twitter –where Mahdi found it and shared with me—other social media, and Western news media.

Figures 6.2 and 6.3 also emphasize a form of Iranian digital resistance. However, in Figure 6.3, physical protest is alluded to, while online discursive practices provide a powerful

feedback loop of dissent. Figure 6.3 uncovers three key dynamics at play: the transformation of religious symbols into sites of contestation, the reversal of power dynamics through memetic discourse, and the emergence of tactical visibility management among clerics. The circulation of memes featuring clerics with turbans, or in the case of 6.3, just the turban, demonstrates how digital culture transforms traditional symbols of authority into vehicles of subversion. The transformation of turban tossing into viral memes, like Figure 6.3, exemplifies how gaming communities weaponized their digital literacy. Iranian gamers, already skilled in evading government restrictions and creating coded messages through games, applied these tactics to protest memes. They utilized similar strategies of visual modification and rapid distribution that they had mastered in gaming contexts. These images, far from mere jokes, function as subtle acts of defiance that accumulate into broader resistance patterns in the face of authoritarianism (Scott 1990). The helmet strap edit, in particular, cleverly inverts the turban's traditional symbolism of religious authority into one of vulnerability and defensiveness.

When I showed Azar the meme from Figure 6.3, she laughed, "That's one way to keep the turban on!" Meme-making, sharing, and turban tossing have been enmeshed to subvert the socio-discursive repertoire of contention. In this case, humor acts as a coping mechanism, an act of resiliency towards the everyday. The meme's visual composition deliberately juxtaposes the sacred with the mundane, transforming the turban from a symbol of religious authority into an object of practical necessity by adding the helmet-style buckle. The anonymous commenter's reference to Chinese copying adds another layer of market-driven satire, suggesting that even religious garments can be subject to commercial reproduction and innovation. This digital artifact exemplifies how protest humor operates on multiple levels - critiquing authority, suggesting vulnerability of the clerical class, and reimagining religious symbols through a lens of

consumer culture. The circulation of such images across platforms like Twitter and Balatarin demonstrates how digital networks amplify localized acts of resistance into broader patterns of cultural subversion.

Figure 6.3. This turban with a helmet buckle meme was passed around on Twitter. It's also present on Balatarin. The caption for the page reads: "The new achievement of the seminary." An anonymous commenter says, "They should patent as soon as possible so that China does not copy it."[111]

The memeification of humor allows for another "atmosphere of living" or attunement where "actors come to feel that something is happening" (Amrute 2019: 59; Stewart 2011). As Amrute points out, technologies afford people the opportunity to live through things in different ways and even "self-practiced in the art of taking chances as a way of life, both to capitalize on qualities of personhood and to simply survive" (2019: 59-60). For those who tip turbans, "the

[111] See: https://www.balatarin.com/permlink/2022/10/30/5889482

worlding of the place accreted out of opening events" (Stewart 2011: 447). In those instances, the frivolity of tossing a turban is a type of tactical non-compliance with authorities. This whimsy can subvert the violent state by creating moments of collective effervescence where the seemingly playful act of turban tossing transforms into a powerful assertion of agency, turning symbols of clerical authority into objects of ridicule while building an alternative "atmosphere of living" where resistance becomes possible through shared acts of defiance.

Figure 6.4. Kissing turbans or *ammamebusi* countermovement example[112]

While protest memes operate as tools of resistance, creating a unified visual language that challenges oppressive symbols, state actors have not remained silent. They have promptly introduced counter-memes—a deliberate effort to reclaim the narrative and dilute the impact of protest imagery. Counter-memes and counter-humor thus seek to undermine change. For instance, as detailed in recent analyses of digital nationalism in South Asia, state-backed groups have employed tactics such as parodying peace messages and co-opting viral hashtags to mock dissent. One notable example includes the ridicule of the Voice of Ram's peace video, where

[112] "Youth's turban-kissing is a response to insults to the clergy + video." 2022. Mashregh News. https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/1433798/%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%87-%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%BE%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AE%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA-%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AA-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D9%81%DB%8C%D9%84%D9%85

aggressive Hindutva memes shifted the narrative by attributing domestic problems to banal factors like gas shortages and Bollywood clichés (Udupa 2019: 3156). Similarly, organized online campaigns utilizing hashtags such as #ModiInsultsIndia and #ModiIndiasPride have been mobilized to reinforce official discourse and discredit liberal perspectives (Udupa 2019: 3152). These counter-memes work by mimicking the form and style of protest memes, yet they subtly shift the message towards endorsement of state-sanctioned discourse. By anticipating and neutralizing dissent, the regime uses these counter-memes to undermine grassroots digital resistance while reinforcing its image as the protector of social order.

The kissing turbans incident functions similarly to the South Asian examples by using humor to appropriate and transform a symbolic gesture into a counter-narrative. In both cases, the imagery—whether it's the subversive mockery of a peace message or the playful, unexpected display of affection—serves to dilute the original meaning. Here, just as South Asian counter-memes twist and parody protest images to undermine the grassroots message, the kissing turbans gesture repurposes a symbol of cultural identity, turning an expected solemn or defiant symbol into one that invites ridicule and shifts the narrative. This subversion through humor not only challenges the original intent but also reinforces the state's agenda by neutralizing dissent with playful yet pointed counter-messaging.

When discussing this continued popularity of turban tossing across social media on November 30th, 2022, I messaged Mahdi on Discord, asking, "What do you think about this turban-tossing protest tactic? How do you see this being framed in mainstream media in Iran?" Mahdi responded, "It's simple. Mard, Mihan, Abadi. Zan, Zendegi, Azadi. We want freedom, and these despots kill women and children. So, messing with some religious Mullah's hat is a simple yet necessary challenge to religion, to the regime." I posed the same question for Azar

over voice chat on Discord, asking about her perspective on turban tossing. She stated, “Clearly, Mullahs ask for it for being so provocative.” Thereafter, Mariam chimed in, “Honestly, these Mullahs are disrespecting us by perpetuating a life of piety but never really helping Iranians.”

These gamers’ views emphasize historical grievances and thus point to the longstanding influence of clerics as having contributed to policies or practices that they consider oppressive or resistant to modernization. Their perception is that clerical leadership has frequently stifled political dissent and curtailed civil liberties. Additionally, the generational shift via social media has emphasized a desire for reform and more secular social policies, often targeting clerical establishments as symbols of outdated practices, as with turban tossing. Following our conversations, Mahdi and Azar reinforced this polarized perception within the Iranian community. Azar chimed in later that day: “I believe turban tossing is a symbolic dismantling of a long-entrenched patriarchal system,” while others like Farid outside Iran questioned the protesting tactics’ broader political impact, stating, “it’s hard to say if this will actually inspire change.” Our discussions increasingly centered on the symbolism of the act and whether such displays could bridge the gap between isolated protest and collective action. Throughout November, many joined the conversation, and it became evident that the turban tossing was evolving from a spontaneous act of defiance into a deliberate protest tactic that could reshape online and offline public discourse.

Digital Ethnography Fieldnotes. November 30^{th,} 2022. Later that day, I was sitting in front of my computer, trying to connect with participants. I got through to Mariam, who then shared her perspective on the viral turban-tossing video: “When I first saw this video circulating on Twitter, I immediately saved it and shared it in our gaming group. It resonated with us, like a small victory against a seemingly invincible power. We’ve been sharing these videos. We believe this resistance targets not the spiritual foundations of Islam or its faithful practitioners but rather confronts a system of power that has weaponized religious symbols and practices to justify state

violence and oppression. The protest challenges the exploitation of faith for political control, not the sanctity of religious belief itself." Her comment illustrates how digital platforms transform singular acts of protest into shared symbols of defiance, weaving together gaming culture, political resistance, and social media activism into a cohesive narrative of contemporary Iranian digital dissent.

Videos and memes of turban-tossing created by other users were not the only time gamers found humor in these events. For example, when the turban-tossing videos emerged, Arman and Babak on Discord quickly created variations using game characters and mechanics. One of their inside jokes reimagined the turban toss using Counter-Strike's grenade-throwing animation, resonating protest sentiments.

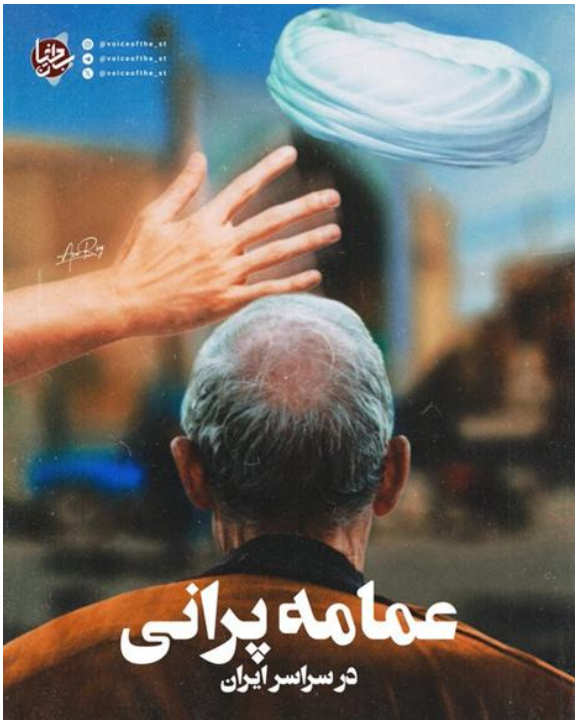


Figure 6.5. An image passed around by Iranians on Twitter says, "Tossing turbans throughout Iran."

When I contacted Azar again about this issue in December 2022, she said, "Mullahs deserve the disrespect. *Ammame parani* is nonviolent, unlike the atrocities committed against us

all daily, not to mention what happened to Mahsa, Nika, Setareh, and on and on, not to mention that women are completely dehumanized constantly! The least malicious thing we can do is remove that toilet paper." Tossing turbans, or *ammame parani*, emerged as a symbol of resistance in Iran witnessed by anyone tuned in on Instagram during the protests from 2022 to 2024. Thus, for Iranians, social media has been a pivotal space to amplify the impact of turban tossing. Videos of these acts, often carried out by members of Generation Z, have gone viral, garnering millions of views and sparking global conversations about the oppressive policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI).

Platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have become arenas for digital activism, where users share, comment on, and remix these videos to express solidarity and resistance.[113] By targeting clerics wearing turbans, a key symbol of religious and political power in Iran, protestors challenge the very foundation of the IRI's control. This act of defiance is not only a critique of the regime's policies but also a broader statement against the intertwining of religion and state power. Generation Z, known for their digital fluency and creativity, has been at the forefront of this movement. Their use of humor, memes, and tactical frivolity has redefined the nature of protest in the digital age. Turban-tossing videos are often accompanied by witty captions, soundtracks, and visual effects, making them entertaining and politically charged. For instance, in Figure 6.5, an image passed around by Arman and Babak through their Discord server suggests that symbols of religious and cultural authority can be repurposed into instruments of radical resistance, transforming everyday religious artifacts into symbolic forms of dissent and defiance. This blend of humor and resistance has resonated with audiences worldwide, drawing attention to the plight of Iranian citizens.

[113] See: https://www.tiktok.com/@mahhsaamini/video/7163950865773088046

Figure 6.6. A circulated meme that says**, "**Each turban is 6 to 11 meters of fabric. If you bring them with you, you can make at least 20 Molotov cocktails from each one. #Mahsa_Amini"

However, the act of turban tossing and its online dissemination have not been without consequences. The Iranian regime has responded with increased surveillance, arrests, and crackdowns on Internet access. Despite these challenges, the persistence of digital activism highlights the resilience and determination of the Iranian people in their fight for freedom and justice. Turban tossing online represents a unique intersection of cultural symbolism, digital activism, and generational resistance. It exemplifies how acts of defiance, amplified through social media, can challenge oppressive regimes and inspire global solidarity. As the struggle for freedom in Iran continues, cyberspace remains an arena for expressing dissent and advocating for change.

For as long as the IRI has existed, there has been anti-regime, pro-freedom sentiment within the women's movement. In many ways, the Woman Life Freedom movement is remarkably different because it calls for a transformative social and political change amounting to regime change. Meanwhile, the women's protest after the founding of the IRI in 1979, up to Woman Life Freedom, called for the reform of IRI policies. Meanwhile, the veil as a point of contention for leaders has been ongoing since the rule of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, who banned the veil during his rule. It was completely reversed when women had to wear the veil under Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Republic. It should not be lost on anyone that controlling the political landscape through controlling women reflects the power of the state. By asserting this power, the state becomes more rooted in society. Add the layer of Western perceptions of the veil and the questionable desire to liberate women in Iran while carpet bombing several parts of the Middle East. The dynamic of political theatre just gets more bizarre. But why is the Woman Life Freedom movement different than the women's movement right after the 1979 Revolution?

After the 1979 revolution, women experienced new discriminatory laws and practices, which became a central issue of their political discourse. Women marched on International Women's Day on March 8, 1979, which led to massive protests as women took to the streets to oppose new dress restrictions, nullification of divorce rights, and possible disenfranchisement (Osanloo 2009: 2). While pro-regime forces met the demonstrators with violence, the protestors declared that they had fundamental rights, namely individual freedom to live their lives the way they want. Tens of thousands of citizens protested to promote the citizens' desire for freedom across most major cities, with over 22,000 imprisoned during the protests. According to the UN Fact-Finding mission statement delivered by Sara Hossain, Chairperson of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran, the IRI was guilty of crimes

against humanity, specifically those of murder, imprisonment, torture, rape and other forms of sexual violence, persecution, enforced disappearance, and other inhumane acts that have been committed as part of a widespread and systematic attack directed against a civilian population – namely women, girls, and others expressing support for human rights (Hossain 2024).

This disproportionate force against protestors made the Woman Life Freedom movement particularly deadly and brutal, further deepening the lack of fundamental freedoms and human rights, especially for women and girls. On September 20, 2023, with a vote of 152 to 34, Iran's parliament passed a law to penalize women for not wearing the hijab appropriately and those who support the immoral behavior of inappropriately wearing the hijab, like business owners. As of April 2024, the 70-article "Hijab and Chastity Bill" is nearly finalized to become law. Opponents of the bill argue that it will further gender segregation and surveillance against citizens. In Articles 36 and 37 of the "Hijab and Chastity Bill", citizens can report those who do not wear the hijab appropriately with photo evidence and violators will be charged with insult and mockery of the hijab.[114] Lawmakers hope to garner revenue. So, violators are subject to a 30 million Iranian rial fine that would be automatically charged to their bank accounts.[115] With AI CCTV monitoring of public spaces, the IRI would extend its use of a database to identify women and fine them. I reached out to Mariam about hijab enforcement. Mariam said, "It's all hypocritical. Reza Tsaghati, head of the Islamic Guidance and enforcer of chastity, was fired last year for gay sex. The government denies everything."

[114] "Islamic Republic of Iran's Law to Support the Family Through Promotion of Culture of Chastity and Hijab." (2024). The Center for Human Rights. https://iranhumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/Hijab-Law-Final-CHRI-Translation.pdf

[115] "Iran Mulls Financial Penalties for Hijab Rule Violations." 2024. RFE/RL's Radio Farda. https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-mulls-financial-penalties-for-hijab-rule-violations/32876693.html

Iranians use memes to satirize the socio-political landscape and address the gender apartheid and unequal world they live in. Memes, therefore, provide a "multimodal agentive" construct, a cultural tool that produces catharsis to voice perspective towards an oppressive system. Persian multimodal humor is thus a realistic reflection of what is going on in Iran (Heidari-Shahreza 2019:64). Participants echo these sentiments. Arman and Babak shared the Figure 6.7 meme with me from a Reddit post they had seen.

Figure 6.7. A meme my participants found on Reddit.

We chatted briefly about gender issues thereafter. Some of the most colloquial remarks and exclamations about the current gender divide:

Arman: My brother, women's rights are human rights.

Babak: Waiting for women to rule this nation.

Arman: No cap.

Babak: Bro.

The term “no cap” is typically a colloquial phrase used by gamers in the US, originating in African American culture. While non-gamers in Iran may not use the term, Arman is using the term to convey the truthfulness of Babak’s statement. It is quite evident that Arman and Babak take a serious perspective on women’s rights. The conversation deepened:

Arman: It is incredibly unpopular in Iran to support the hijab.

Babak: Yeah. Compulsory hijab is ridiculous. If a Mullah can take their turban off, why cannot women take off the hijab? It’s all for some bullshit cultural preservation. And those who purport Islamic cultural values tend to be oppressive hypocrites.

Arman and Babak are worn down due to distrust of the IRI’s suppressive measures. They must maintain a sense of humor in the face of oppression. So, the tactical frivolity of turban tossing becomes synonymous with removing the authority of those in every state sector, including education, the economy, the military, the parliament, and the judiciary, where clerical rule or assembly occurs. By rejecting clericalism, gamers and regular citizens in Iran support women’s rights. As participants engage with meme sharing, they engage in contentious performance and politics to subvert the status quo. How the IRI responds, through violence and laws like compulsory hijab and chastity, shows a conscious rigidity and desire to control citizens’ cultural and political lives. Mahdi’s statement, “Mard, Mihan, Abadi. Zan, Zendegi, Azadi. We want freedom, and these despots kill women and children. So, messing with some religious Mullah’s hat is a simple yet necessary challenge to religion, to the regime,” underscores the symbolic significance of this tactic in the broader struggle for women’s rights and regime change.

My conversations with participants illuminate the lived experiences of Iranian protestors while emphasizing the complex interplay between humor, resistance, and the pursuit of women’s rights. As the IRGC’s Cyber Police, Morality Police, and other entities respond with increasing

violence and repressive measures–whether it is the Cyber Police crackdown on Telegram messaging or the Morality Police trying to enforce veiling on the streets, the transformative potential of the Woman Life Freedom movement becomes ever more apparent, signaling a pivotal moment in Iran's broader ongoing struggle for freedom and equality.

Throughout the chapter, I emphasized the importance of humor during acts of resistance. Turban tossing also represents how ordinary people challenge authority through seemingly mundane but subversive acts. The humorous element of turban tossing deploys mockery and satire to undermine dominant power structures. The transformation of these acts into memes and viral content creates digital spreadability wherein forms of resistance circulate widely while maintaining their subversive character. Comparative perspectives from other Middle Eastern protest movements enrich our understanding of the significance of turban tossing. During the Arab Spring, particularly in Egypt and Tunisia, protesters similarly employed tactical frivolity and digital activism to challenge authoritarian regimes. However, turban tossing in Iran differs in targeting a religious authority symbol. This specificity reflects a precarious resistance where acts challenge authority while attempting to minimize the risk of severe repression. The Woman Life Freedom movement's use of turban tossing also demonstrates social nonmovements through the collective actions of non-collective actors. Still, turban tossing is also very much a political protest act. Unlike traditional protest movement practices, which often have clear leadership structures, turban tossing represents a decentralized form of resistance that spreads through imitation and digital sharing. It is likely a grey issue – a political act capturing the essence of a movement, and at the same time, flourishing with the virality of memes due to its spread across the Internet.

The theoretical significance of turban tossing extends beyond its immediate context in Iran. It exemplifies how contemporary protest movements navigate the intersection of physical and digital space, combining traditional forms of resistance with new technological affordances. This demonstrates how individual acts of protest gain significance through their digital amplification and replication. Turban tossing represents a sophisticated form of resistance that operates simultaneously on physical, digital, and symbolic levels. By integrating theories of embodied resistance, digital activism, and humor in protest movements, we can better understand how contemporary Iranian protesters navigate the complex landscape of authoritarian control and technological opportunity. I believe this cultural movement contributes to a broader understanding of how resistance movements adapt and evolve in response to changing political and technological contexts, particularly in authoritarian settings where traditional forms of protest face severe repression. Additionally, the theoretical framework of tactical frivolity helps us understand the significance of turban tossing as a protest tactic. It illuminates broader patterns in contemporary social movements, particularly in contexts where digital and physical forms of resistance intersect. As the Woman Life Freedom movement evolves, these theoretical insights may help us anticipate and understand new forms of creative resistance that emerge at the intersection of embodied protest and digital activism.

Conclusion

The Woman Life Freedom movement's practice of turban tossing offers crucial insights for Middle East studies while advancing theoretical frameworks for understanding contemporary protest movements. In this chapter, I argued that turban tossing (*ammame parani*) in Iran's Woman Life Freedom movement represents a transformative moment in contemporary protest movements, demonstrating how integrating embodied resistance, digital activism, and tactical

frivolity can effectively challenge authoritarian power structures. My analysis showed how seemingly simple acts of defiance, amplified through digital networks and embedded within youth culture, can evolve into powerful tools for political resistance and social change. This chapter's analysis contributed to three key areas of scholarly discourse: the evolution of resistance tactics in authoritarian contexts, the role of digital media in amplifying local acts of defiance, and the intersection of cultural expression and political protest. First, regarding Middle East studies, turban tossing represents a significant evolution in the region's repertoire of contention. Like the use of street art during the Arab Spring or the deployment of symbolic gestures in the Green Movement, this practice demonstrates how protesters innovatively adapt cultural symbols to challenge authority. The targeting of clerical turbans – symbols of religious and political authority – builds upon a regional tradition of using symbolic acts to contest power while introducing new tactical elements specific to Iran's theocratic context. Second, I advanced theoretical frameworks for understanding resistance to digital authoritarianism. Turban tossing demonstrates how contemporary movements leverage digital platforms to transform localized acts of defiance into viral phenomenon. This hybrid form of protest, combining physical action with digital dissemination, suggests potential new terrains for understanding how resistance operates in the age of social media.

Third, integrating tactical frivolity and cultural subversion into political protest contributes to understanding how movements navigate repression. Turban tossing illustrates how humor and seemingly playful acts can constitute serious political challenges while minimizing risk to my participants. I found this to be particularly relevant to studying resistance in other authoritarian contexts throughout the Middle East and beyond. My findings also posed several promising directions for future research in Middle East studies. Scholars might examine how

similar hybrid forms of protest emerge in other regional contexts, how digital platforms continue to reshape the dynamics of resistance, and how movements adapt cultural symbols for political purposes. The Woman Life Freedom movement's multimodal combination of embodied resistance, street and digital activism, and cultural subversion provides a valuable framework for analyzing emergent forms of protest. Therefore, turban tossing represents more than a tactical innovation in Iranian protest; it exemplifies broader shifts in resistance in contemporary authoritarian contexts. Through bridging physical and digital realms, I combined serious political challenges with tactical frivolity and leveraging cultural symbols for political purposes in my analysis. As movements worldwide continue, the analytical approaches developed here will prove increasingly valuable for understanding new forms of protest and resistance.

Conclusion

Throughout the dissertation, I explored the censorship practices of the IRI and how they construct Iranian gamers' predisposition toward the state. Through varied discourse on rights to access the Internet in Iran, I elucidated that censorship conditions harkening to the very implementation of the Internet have led to social movements among social media users and currently non-movements by Iranian gamers through their use of VPNs. While internal forces such as Internet blackouts prevent Internet access, US foreign policy squeezes the Iranian economy and stymies diplomatic off-ramps. I illustrated how the intersubjectivity of meaning-making in online games creates and amplifies Iranian gamers' desire to play online despite foreign and local Internet controls. I particularly emphasized power and resilience to reflectively assess and reveal power structures that continue suppressing Iranians' rights to access the Internet and how the political theatre is intimately linked to these oppressive measures.

My dissertation research demonstrated how Iranian gamers navigate and resist state-imposed digital controls. Throughout, I emphasized the lived experiences of Iranian gamers and how they use gaming spaces for affective resistance and adaptation. On the other hand, I also challenged other perspectives on the emancipatory nature of digital technologies. To do so, I stressed the dual role of digital technologies as tools for both state repression and citizen resistance, which provided insights into the evolving strategies of the Iranian authoritarian regimes' information controls program via institutions like the FATA and the Basij Cyberspace Council. I also shared how Iranian citizens navigate these state-imposed digital controls through VPNs, and I engaged with these findings within broader sociopolitical and cultural contexts like Russia and China. I found that Iranian gamers resist state control in ways that go beyond technical solutions. They build tight communities, use humor to deal with censorship, and share

strategies for getting around blocks. By looking at their daily lives and experiences, I show how gaming becomes more than just entertainment – it is a way for them to create emotional connections and maintain some control over their digital lives, even under restrictions.

While some scholars focus on gaming, only one or two other scholars have addressed gamers in Iran with a social sciences or humanities lens (Šisler 2017; Khoshsaligheh & Ameri 2020), let alone committing to the methodology of ethnography while researching Iranian gamers. A few have touched on gamers in the MENA region using an ethnographic lens (Alfaraj 2016; Kamiab 2022). Iranian gamers have thusly played on the borderlands of cyberspace, often overlooked. This alone is not unique, as much of the global south is often ignored, as there has been little to no attention to highly populated *WoW* servers in Latin America, gamer cafes in the Middle East, or anywhere nearby like Armenia. If it were not for COVID, my initial space would have been Yerevan, Armenia, to begin the research by attending gaming cafes so that I could understand the experiences of Iranian-Armenians, especially since it felt like every corner had a gaming cafe when I went there in summer 2019. For reasons well-known to scholars, it would not have been possible, with the emphasis on resistance, to conduct research in Iran proper. What makes this dissertation a special contribution to the field is its novel integration of gaming and political resistance through an affective lens. It is timely because of what happened in real-time during the Woman Life Freedom movement and the continual unrolling of the Protection Bill and Seventh Development Plan. It also takes on spaces of so-called leisure by showing that games are serious places to bond, build skills, and even, for some people, find purpose. Would we not be who we are, where we are, changed as people up to this moment, without our friends and weak ties?

It is also not lost on me that some may find it difficult to consider online gaming a serious space for conducting field research. However, gaming communities often overlap with forms of digital resistance wherever the groups fall on the political spectrum. Thus, the non-serious perception of gaming allows for it to be an effective space for political significance and, thus, for conducting field research. In many ways, gaming spaces feel more authentic than social media because social media is a highly cultivated space for public image. In contrast, gaming lacks the same level of self-censorship, as many who play games often strive for authenticity.

My dissertation research contributes significantly to three major academic fields: Middle East Studies, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and Gamer Studies. Through a digital ethnographic approach and sociotechnical and affective theoretical frameworks, I provide insights into the intersection of digital technologies, state control, and social resistance in contemporary Iran. In the field of Middle East Studies, I contribute to work that focuses on digital resistance and authoritarianism (Tufekci 2017; Jones 2022). My research demonstrates how digital technologies simultaneously serve as tools for citizen empowerment and state repression (MacKinnon 2011; Morozov 2011; Olaniran & Williams 2020; Jones 2022). The dissertation builds on the work of scholars like MacKinnon (2011), Jones (2022), and Radcliffe (2018), who have examined digital authoritarianism and the role of technology in the Middle East. My work shows how Iranian gamers use jokes, communities, and technical workarounds to deal with state control. I looked at the emotional side of digital resistance – how it feels to navigate these spaces and create connections despite restrictions. The research also engages with literature on the limitations of digital tools for political mobilization, challenging the notion of technological utopianism (Morozov 2011). I have also analyzed the Iranian context to reveal how citizens navigate complex digital landscapes while confronting state control mechanisms through

sociotechnical measures like VPNs (Golub, 2010) and affective dimensions like humor and tactical frivolity (Tilly, 1986).

My dissertation contributes to affect theory through its examination of affective entanglements– the emotional and relational aspects of gaming under information controls (Barad 2007; Berlant 2011; Hillis et al. 2015; Leys 2017; Osanloo 2021). I particularly extend Berlant's (2011) work by emphasizing Iranian gamers' attachments to digital spaces despite precarity. I build on Hillis et al.'s (2015) networked affects framework by exploring how affect moves through digital networks under authoritarian regimes. Through my research with Iranian gamers, I have shown how technology, politics, and everyday life are affectively tangled. When gamers face restrictions, they are not only finding technical circumvention tactics but reaching out to others where connections would otherwise be severed, thus creating spaces for themselves despite government control. This adds to the work of scholars like Lauren Berlant, Karen Barad, and Arzoo Osanloo, who theorize affect's role in shaping socio-material-discursive realities. It explores how the material inequalities created by US sanctions and the Iranian government's information controls interact with local cultural norms and social practices to create "digital affect assemblages" – complex configurations of technical, social, and emotional elements that shape Iranian gamers' lived experiences. My research, therefore, has shown how these entanglements shape social and political dynamics, offering a more nuanced view that complicates the simple narratives of digital liberation or oppression. I demonstrate how digital tools have transformed socio-political landscapes in a balanced way, contributing to a deeper understanding of how technology shapes social movements and everyday life in the Middle East.

Beyond the Middle East, I explore other gaming cultures throughout parts of the dissertation to reveal similarities and differences in a complex social dynamic, cultural hybridity,

and evolving identities in various countries. In the United States, gaming communities are increasingly recognized as spaces where participatory cultures and digital self-expression offer significant social and personal capital. In Brazil, the challenges of harassment and gender imbalance persist, highlighting the intersection of opportunity and discrimination within these virtual realms (Silva et al. 2023). The Chinese context, as demonstrated in qualitative studies, illustrates how online gaming not only fosters deep social connectivity and local cultural adaptations but also functions as a site of dual hybridity, where global game mechanics meet indigenous cultural practices (Yoon & Cheon 2014; Liu 2023). Meanwhile, the intricate cross-cultural exchanges observed in Korean and Chinese MMOs underscore the transformative potential of gaming as a transnational cultural practice that redefines traditional notions of community and media consumption (Yoon & Cheon 2014). Overall, these findings emphasize that while gaming serves as a universal medium for social and economic engagement, it simultaneously reflects and reinforces the distinctive cultural nuances and challenges of each region.

While in the field, I noted how virtual intimacy, embodied in gaming communities, becomes a site of resistance against digital authoritarianism and a fundamental aspect of emotional well-being and social belonging. Thus, my research intersected with gaming, emotion, and resistance to providing a novel perspective in gamer studies literature. I also showed how gaming platforms are integral spaces of cultural exchange for Iranians. I demonstrated that gaming communities facilitate cross-cultural dialogue and understanding, even as state authorities attempt to restrict international connections, highlighting the importance of international connections despite political restrictions.

In my research, I explored how digital technologies operate under authoritarian regimes, focusing on Iran's digital infrastructure and Internet governance (MacKinnon 2011; Morozov 2011). I highlighted the ways the state uses its infrastructural power to wage soft war (Golkar 2015; Jones 2022), while also showing how citizens find creative ways to bypass these controls. I looked at how Iranians use VPNs and other tools to get around restrictions, showing how they have created their networks to stay connected and build communities despite state controls. Offering technical and human-centered insights, my work sheds light on how people adapt to and resist digital restrictions in authoritarian contexts (Calingaert 2010; Michaelsen 2018).

My research also breaks new ground because I am one of the first to study Iranian gamers up close. Through their stories and experiences, I have shown how gaming has become a way for Iranians to push back against restrictions and build connections, even when the government tries to control their online lives. I also observed that gaming communities in Iran have evolved into crucial spaces of belonging for youth and young adults, filling voids left by restricted social media and public spaces. Throughout my analysis of gamers' experiences, I added to theoretical frameworks like Bayat's (2009) quiet encroachment, Tilly's tactical frivolity (1986), and sociotechnical theory and lifeworlds theory. By doing so, I showed that gaming platforms represent a significant way to think about how everyday acts like gaming can be paramount to community building and resilience against authoritarianism. I thusly demonstrated how gaming becomes a form of everyday resistance against state authority, transcending its traditional categorization as a mere leisure activity.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Sociotechnical Lifeworlds & Gatekeeping

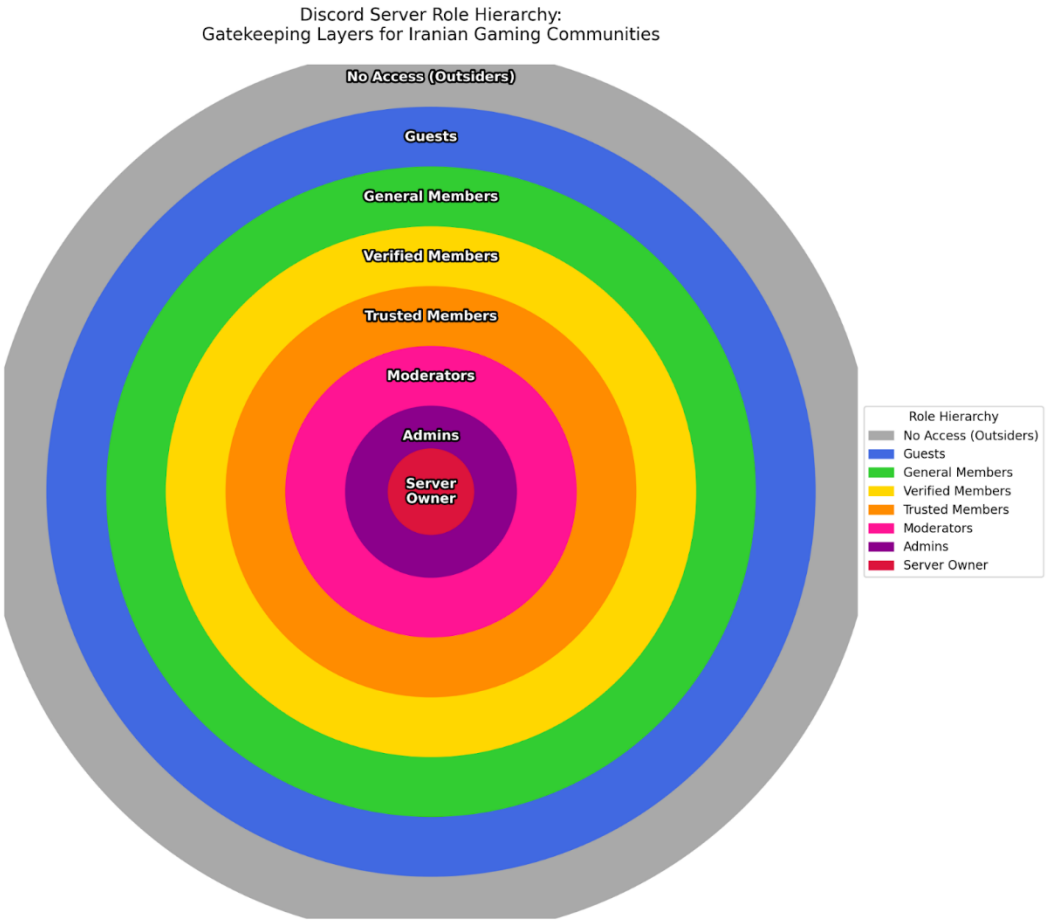


Figure 1: *Concentric Circles of Trust*

When looking at **Figure 1** of the concentric circles of trust model, the layered structure of Iranian gaming communities reflects social practices that govern access and participation. Each circle represents a level of trust, with the innermost circles reserved for the most trusted members and the outer circles accommodating newer or less verified participants. This structure protects sensitive information and interactions while allowing community growth and engagement. Iranian gamers use Discord's role management system as a critical technical feature in enforcing these trust boundaries. Outer circles often include general chat channels where new members can

interact and demonstrate their commitment to the community. To access inner circles, however, requires additional verification, such as vouching by existing members or participation in specific community activities, such as playing games everyone is mutually interested in. Having people vouched for and having a certain level of access, i.e., technical controls and social practices, ensures that only those who have proven their trustworthiness can access sensitive discussions or resources.

Let me explain this further. While all servers are different, Iranians with a server may opt for stringent gatekeeping in the Discord settings via private server creation. From an outsider's perspective, the server's existence—especially a Discord server created by an Iranian in the IRI—may be entirely unknown. To discover the server, one must either be a guest, perhaps joining for a round or two and receiving an invitation to a non-locked channel, or someone closer to the three most inner circles who naturally integrate into the general server population. Someone who is temporarily there is more likely to be disinvited right after because they served their role. For individuals to become verified, they are either a friend of a friend or played with the server core leadership for an extended period of time. When an individual is trusted, they are likely a friend of the Discord server owner or a friend of someone in a leadership role, which could be a moderator or administrator. For a stricter server, these friendships often occur in real life; thus, becoming an insider is difficult or nearly impossible. Depending on the server, a separate moderator role may come into play for various chat or voice channels, which can be related to or the same as the administrator role. Sometimes, the administrator role reflects in-game leadership roles, i.e., a Guild officer, a player involved in the strategic playing for the whole group, etc., and they do not play a part in moderation but have higher access to the server's various channels.

Thus, when reflecting on the model's adaptability, information flow is predicated on how the community has responded to external pressures, such as increased state surveillance, and the information they share. During periods of heightened risk, Discord servers that act as a hub for political discourse may have the inner circles implement stricter gatekeeping measures, such as requiring encrypted communication for specific discussions or temporarily suspending access for less active members. They may hop on another application like Signal that has end-to-end encryption. These adjustments protect the community and reinforce the importance of trust and loyalty within the group. My research shows how information flow is managed within the model. In one instance, a member of an outer circle attempted to share sensitive information without proper authorization. This breach prompted a review of the community's verification processes, introducing additional technical safeguards, such as stricter entry to access specific channels. Additionally, there was a renewed emphasis on social trust-building activities, such as collaborative gaming sessions and group discussions.

The concentric circles model demonstrates how technical features and social practices interact to maintain community cohesion. For instance, when new members were introduced to the community, they were first added to an outer circle and given limited access to resources. Over time, as they participated in community events and built relationships with other members, they were gradually granted access to inner circles. This process ensured security and fostered a sense of belonging and mutual trust among members. The concentric circles of trust model captures an interrelationship between technical features and social practices in Iranian gaming communities. By adapting to internal changes and external pressures, the model ensures that the community remains secure, cohesive, and resilient despite socio-political constraints.

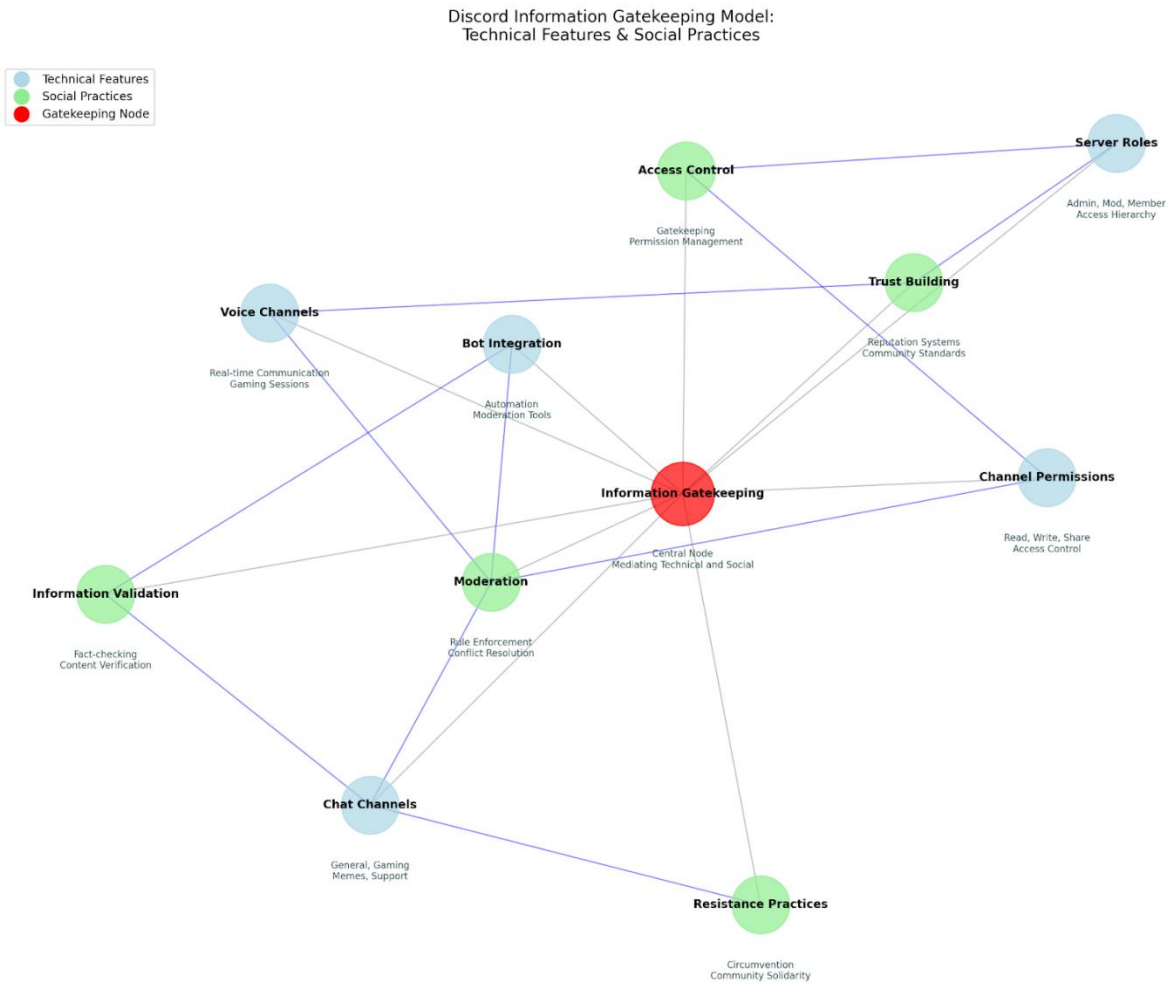


Figure 2. *Discord Gatekeeping on a Granular Level*

Figure 2 of the Discord Information Gatekeeping Model illustrates how digital communities navigate the complex relationship between technical affordances and social practices in managing information flow and access. Building on Jaeger and Burnett's theory of information worlds, which recognizes that information behavior is "shaped simultaneously by both immediate influences... as well as larger social influences" (2010: 44), the model demonstrates how technical features and social practices work in concert to create and maintain community boundaries. These boundaries, as Chatman suggests, serve to "protect ourselves from intrusion from whatever source" while ensuring that "only insiders can truly understand the

social and information worlds of other insiders" (1996: 195). The model's technical features—including server roles, channel permissions, and bot integration—align with Golub's sociotechnical systems analysis in virtual worlds. Just as Golub observed how *World of Warcraft* raiders use "add-ons and voice communication tools" to facilitate coordination and knowledge sharing (2010:35-38), Discord's technical affordances enable communities to automate verification processes, manage access controls, and maintain security protocols. These features create what Jackson describes as a "force field (kraftfeld)" (2013: 23), where community norms and values are encoded into technical systems that govern participation and access. Social practices within the model, including trust-building, moderation, and information validation, reflect what Fisher et al. term "information grounds," where "information flow is a byproduct of social interaction" (2004: 756). Through these practices, Discord server owners ensure that the group's most senior members reinforce technical boundaries through the server owner's guidance. A server owner implementing a vouching system combines technical role assignments with social verification for themselves and the leadership level, creating what Chatman describes as "separation mechanisms" where "select groups of persons view themselves as ultimate insiders" (1996: 195).

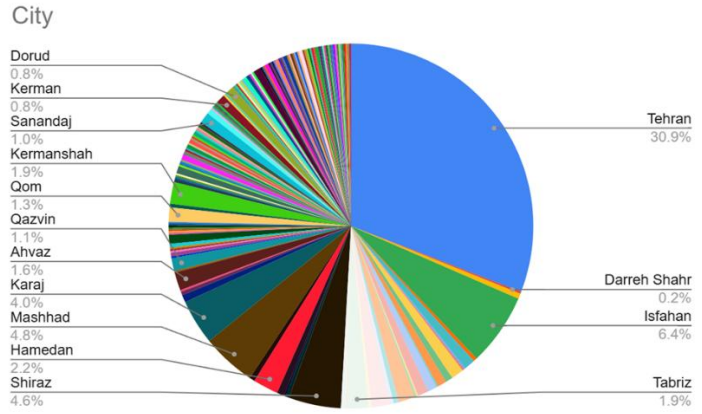
I also argue that there is a level of adaptability to external pressures evident in the model because of the complex relationship between technical features and social practices. Communities can quickly adjust their technical controls and social protocols when faced with surveillance or security threats. A group's adaptability is predicated on intersubjectivity, where trust and shared understanding emerge through interaction as communities collectively negotiate and maintain their boundaries through both technical and social means (Jackson, 2013: 24). The model's emphasis on resistance practices particularly resonates with Chatman's insights into how

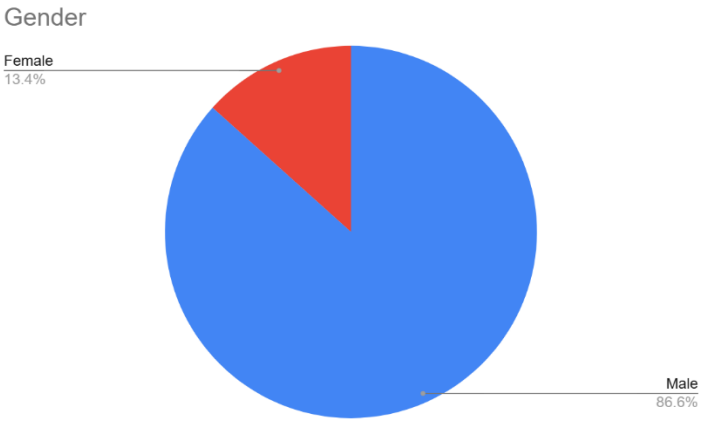
marginalized communities protect themselves through information control. These practices, combined with technical security measures, create what Jaeger describes as "successful risk communication" based on "contextualizing and personalizing the risk to engender trust" (1996: 50). When communities combine technical and social safeguards, they can maintain their integrity while adapting to changing circumstances. My model, therefore, examines how Iranian gaming communities navigate digital spaces under constraint and provides a framework for understanding the operational mechanics of information gatekeeping. The model reflects Golub's observation that virtual worlds' "realness" stems not from their technical sophistication but from participants' commitment to shared projects (2010:40). Through this lens, we can better understand how digital communities maintain cohesion and security while fostering meaningful connections in constrained environments.

Appendix B: Digital Iran and VPNs

The Digital Iran project was funded by Open Tech Fund (OTF) and done under the supervision of the Miaan Group, NGOs. The research emphasized the types of censorship circumvention techniques Iranian gamers use and clarified the gaps between the Internet freedom community and commonly used censorship circumvention tools in the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). To do so, I interviewed Iranian gamers in 2024 to contextualize their circumvention strategies with VPNs commonly supported and created within the Internet freedom community by testing these varied circumvention techniques. Additionally, I cross-analyzed my findings with the IRI's Internet tiering system that consequently segregates users based on status, ultimately determining each citizen's level of Internet access. Through this lens, I studied Internet connectivity and how the National Information Network under the Supreme Council of Cyberspace of Iran enforces tiering to mitigate user access and acts of protest. The website is located at digitaliranproject.com. Below are data models for a forthcoming OTF publication.

I. Survey Data – 664 respondents





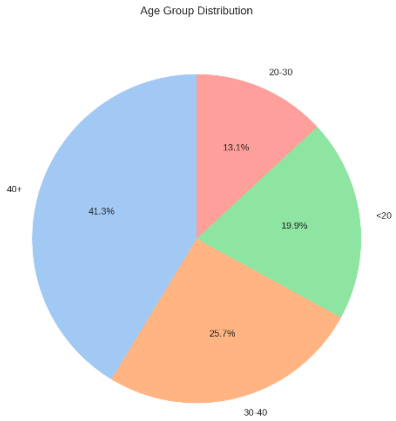


Figure 1: Demographics by City, Gender, and Age group, representing all 664 respondents

After analyzing the qualitative data, I created heatmaps for two of the open-ended questions, as they specifically address one of the five major study questions: With pervasive Internet restrictions, how do gamers maintain their level of access to video games?

Definitions
Generic VPN: VPN is listed but not specified by the survey respondent.
Other: any other tool used that is not Psiphon, Lantern, V2Ray, DNS services mentioned by the respondent. This includes VPNs that are infrequently mentioned like BiuBiu or Argo.
Multiple VPNs: more than 2 VPNs are reportedly being used by the survey respondent.
Why heatmaps: I wanted to find a way to visualize data for the open-ended questions, so I began with this methodology. I also discovered that heatmaps help visualize user behavior.

Question: Please specify which VPN, DNS and/or other methods you use when accessing online video games and for which games.

An Overview

The gaming tool usage analysis across 523 users in the top 50 cities reveals a distinctly different pattern from web browsing preferences. "Other" methods lead the usage at 155 users (29.6%), followed closely by generic VPN solutions with 127 users (24.3%). Psiphon, while dominant in web browsing, ranks third in gaming with 99 users (18.9%).

Looking at the top 15 cities (415 users), the distribution shows similar patterns but with higher concentrations. "Other" methods account for 125 users (30.1%), Generic VPN for 99 users (23.9%), and Psiphon for 72 users (17.3%). The higher prevalence of Generic VPN solutions suggests that gamers may prioritize connection stability and speed over the specific features offered by specialized tools like Psiphon.

Notably, DNS Services show higher adoption in gaming (48 users, 9.2%) compared to web browsing, possibly due to their potential for lower latency. V2Ray maintains a minimal presence with only 4 users (0.8%), indicating it's not a preferred solution for gaming needs. The data suggests that gaming users tend to gravitate toward solutions that prioritize connection quality and consistency over other factors.

The heatmaps suggest that users employ different strategies for different online activities, with web browsing favoring specialized tools like Psiphon, while gaming users opt for more general-purpose solutions and alternative methods.

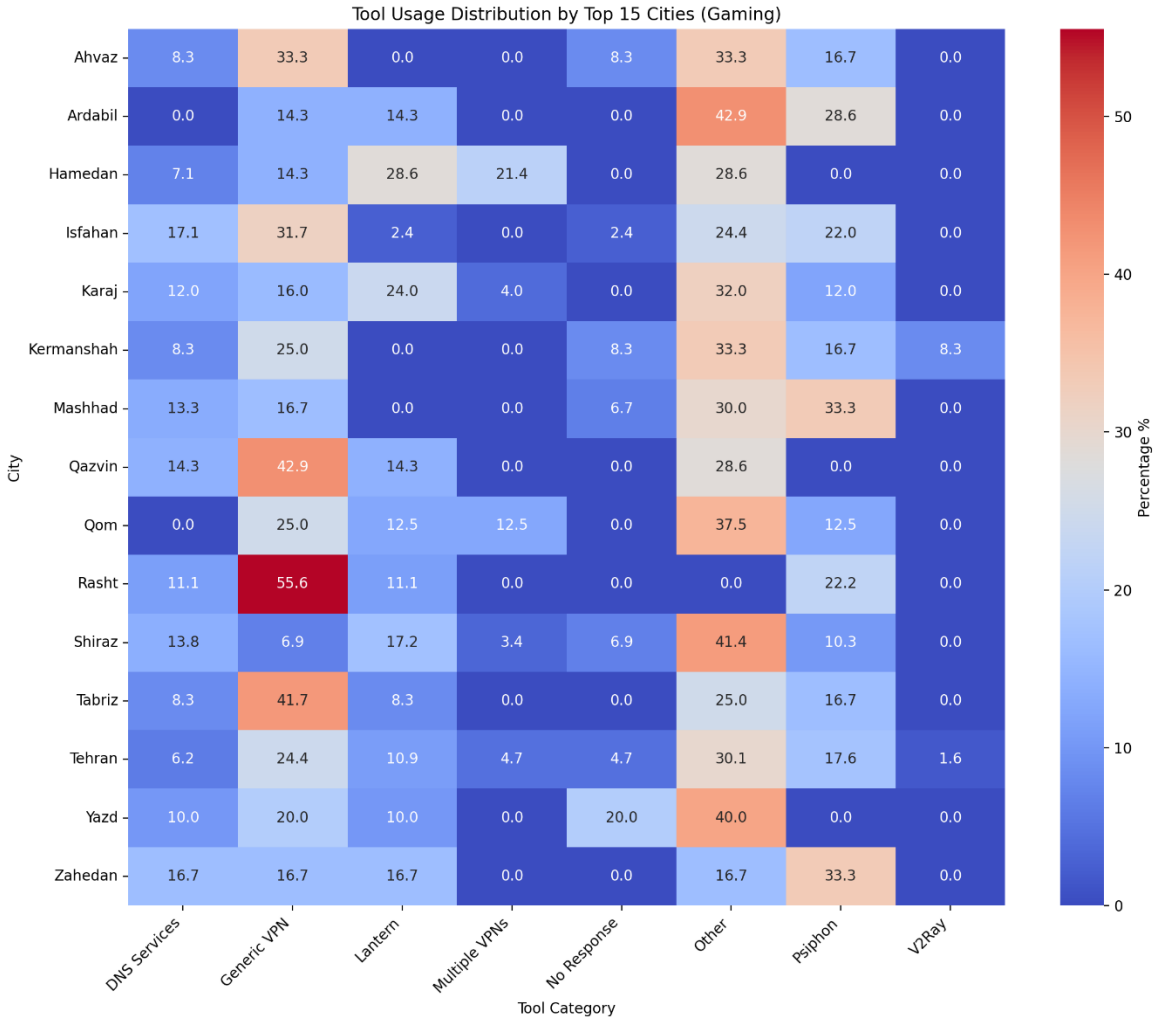


Figure 2. *Heatmap represents the top 15 cities with 415 users out of the 660 respondents.*

II. RIPE Atlas Network Analysis

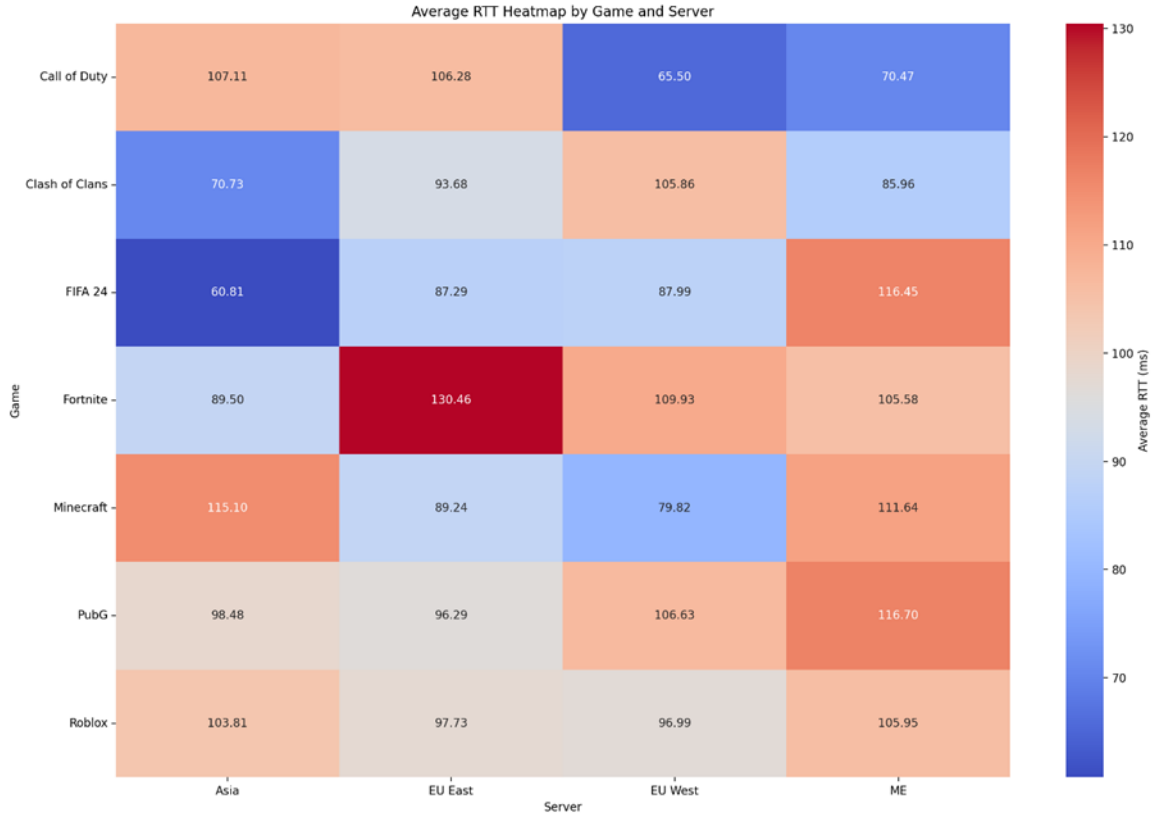


***Figure 3**. RTT Distribution by Video Game and Server*

The analysis of gaming performance metrics, mainly focusing on Round Trip Time (RTT), provides valuable insights into Internet access in Iran. The Middle East (ME) server, geographically relevant to Iran, exhibits an average RTT of 105.17 ms, with a standard deviation of 12.36 ms. This performance is relatively higher than that of European servers, such as EU East and EU West, which have average RTTs of 97.51 ms and 98.95 ms, respectively. These metrics highlight the challenges Iranian users face in accessing low-latency Internet services. High RTT values can significantly impact real-time applications like online gaming, video conferencing, and other latency-sensitive activities. To collect this data, I was assisted by Ainita Project to gather 2,185 measurements and 215 probes across the ME server, indicating a substantial amount of data collected to assess performance using RIPE Atlas.

The importance of Internet access in Iran extends beyond gaming. Reliable and low-latency Internet is crucial for education, remote work, and communication, especially in a region where digital connectivity can bridge gaps in infrastructure and access to global resources. The higher RTT values observed for the ME server emphasize the need for investments in Internet infrastructure, including better routing, increased bandwidth, and reduced packet loss. Therefore, the data-driven analysis of RTT and related metrics sheds light on Iran's Internet access state.

Addressing these challenges is essential for empowering Iranian users and ensuring equitable access to the digital world.

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