Knowledge is power: virtual forms of everyday resistance and grassroots broadcasting in Iran
Dounya (8th May 2020)

Resistance in a totalitarian state takes on unique forms - manifesting in mass protest, underground activities, everyday forms of resistance and more. In 1985 James C. Scott first introduced the concept of everyday resistance. In his book *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, he explained "These techniques [of everyday resistance], for the most part quite prosaic, are the ordinary means of class struggle. They are the techniques of "first resort" in those common historical circumstances in which open defiance is impossible or entails mortal danger."[1] For over two years, I have been researching, documenting and analyzing everyday forms of resistance in contemporary Iran. Such forms can appear through casual conversations, defiant and 'illegal' gestures, grassroots initiatives, and many other methods devised by the oppressed to bypass rules and regulations set by oppressing forces. As an example, communications apps such as Telegram, WhatsApp, Viber as well as social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are frequently used in Iran in both organized forms of activism or what Saeid Golkar in the book *The Whole World is Texting: Youth Protest in the Information Age,* recognizes as "non-movements" [2] which are "shaped under authoritarian regimes where there is no freedom of organization and expression."[3]

In Iran, apps and communication channels are a means through which people organize protests, share news and report information that remains otherwise unreported or is manipulated by the state media. Such grassroots broadcasting has undermined the oppressive Iranian regime to such an extent that the government constantly attempts to limit, hack, censor and ban these communication and social media platforms. Beginning with an analysis of online resistance and grassroots broadcasting during the current Covid-19 Crisis and moving backwards with other examples from the events of the last year, 1396 AD (Spring 2019-Spring 2020) in Iran, I will unpack the importance of such forms of virtual resistance in shaping Iran's contemporary social and political climate.

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[1] James C Scott, "Everyday Form of Resistance," *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 4, (1989): 34, https://rauli.cbs.dk/index.php/cjas/article/view/1765.

[2] " […] the term 'social non-movements' refers to the collective actions of dispersed and fragmented actors; 'non-movements embody shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented, but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leaderships and organizations' (2010, p. 14)." Saeid Golkar, "Student Activism, Social Media and Authoritarian Rule in Iran," in *The Whole World is Texting: Youth Protest in the Information Age*, 2015, ed. Irving Epstein (The Netherlands: Rotterdam, 2015), 62.

[3] Golkar, *The Whole World is Texting,* 62.

Iran has a complicated relationship with social media, communication apps, and Internet as a whole. Since the 1990s when Internet grew more popular in Iran and with it access to information became easier, the use of Internet in and of itself became an act of everyday resistance as people were able to obtain less censored information, blog and communicate without following many of the rules and regulations set by the state. It took some time for the Iranian regime to realize and act on the threat that Internet posed to their existence and control but since then, their techniques of controlling people's Internet activities have become increasingly more advanced. The Iranian government has been utilizing censorship and surveillance technologies made in China and has created a Cyber police branch, The Supreme Council of Virtual Space, to combat the anti-state activities and target political activists and dissidents in Iran. However, this has not deterred Iranians from using Internet as a new public space in which to organize and resist their totalitarian government. For example, many in Iran are using proxy servers and VPNs to access the censored and banned websites and social media channels. The techniques devised and employed by the people in Iran have also improved to better sidestep the restrictions.

Covid-19 pandemic

Becoming one of the epicentres of the new Corona pandemic back in March of 2020, Iranians have been dealing with the devastating impacts of the virus ever since. The first official confirmation of a Covid-19 death in Iran was reported in mid February. Attempting to downplay the scale of this pandemic, the Iranian government was refraining from releasing more accurate information and statistics about the number of cases. Nonetheless, in the days following the first reports people were already questioning the official statistics. To retaliate and discredit such speculations however, as reported by the National Review; "An Iranian parliament spokesman on Wednesday announced that anyone found to be 'spreading rumors' about the Wuhan coronavirus outbreak will be sentenced to one-to-three years in prison and flogging."[4] Nonetheless, anonymous reports were being circulated online. People are still sharing information about the disease and warning each other despite government orders. voice and video recordings as well as photos taken by doctors and nurses in Iran's hospitals were demonstrating, first hand, the scale of the pandemic.

Another example of grassroots broadcasting during the pandemic was the early reporting of the detection of the Covid-19 virus in the infamous Evin Prison. The news was quickly broadcasted through social media channels, despite the relentless attempts by the government to hide this information which endangered the mostly political detainees of this prison. Though other forms of pressure also contributed to the government temporarily releasing over eighty

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[4] Zachary Evans, "Iran to Sentence Citizens Who "Spreads Rumors" about Coronavirus to Flogging, Three Years in Prison," National Review, February 26, 2019, https://www.nationalreview.com/news/iran-to-sentence-citizens-who-spreads-rumors-about-coronavirus-to-flogging-three-years-in-prison/.

five thousand prisoners, the public knowledge of the virus leading to pressure from the people was a significant factor. Reports from those inside the prison and those temporarily released about the conditions and lack of proper preventative measures and supplies have also exposed the dangers for those who still remain incarcerated in prisons across Iran.

Iranians have also been taking matters into their own hands when it comes to public safety. Some companies with the ability to produce disinfectants have been halting their regular work to provide the necessary disinfecting agents to hospitals and medical centres. Videos of people teaching how to sew masks and scrubs to donate to their near medical centres have also been circulating on social media. Fundraising initiatives have been organized by Iranian expatriates and citizens to support the fight against Corona. As an example "Help Iranians Fight Coronavirus" Go Fund Me page is set up by Negar Mortazavi, an American-Iranian Journalist, to provide supplies to healthcare facilities and families in Iran.[5]

Exposing government shortcomings is one part of such forms of activism, but demonstrating the lack of control of the government in handling the pandemic is far more important and devastating to the Iranian regime. BBC Persian, a news station based in the UK, recently released a discovery on the role of Mahan Air, a popular Iranian airline, in spreading the Corona Virus in Iran. According to the article, Mahan Air had defied the orders of the Iranian government to halt direct flights from China to Iran due to the pandemic. The spread of this report on social media brings to question the freedom and autonomy such companies have in Iran and by proxy questions the power of the Iranian government over its own internal affairs.

In another case, an Iranians citizen journalist revealed the impact of the US sanctions during this pandemic through a cellphone video. The video showed a series of trucks which were carrying medical supplies to Iran being held for three days in Romania at the Bulgarian border. In the video one of the truck drivers was asked about the situation. He explained that the drivers had been stranded there for three days without being provided food or water as the Bulgarian government was refusing entry, stating the US sanctions as their reason. He then remarked that the Iranian consulate was also not responding.[6] This video, as an example, was widely shared on twitter.

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[5] Negar Mortazavi, "Help Iranians Fight Coronavirus," Gofundme, March 24, 2020, https://www.gofundme.com/f/negar039s-campaign-for-relief-international?sharetype=teams&member=4039340&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=p_na+share-sheet&rcid=ae7854d31775458da6d0c0e895d61a5e.

[6] Sami Ramadani (@samiramadani1), "Lorries packed with medical supplies destined for Iran, to fight Coronavirus, are being stopped by #Romania & #Bulgaria obeying US sanctions & economic warfare on Iran." Twitter, March 23, 2019, https://twitter.com/OlsiJ/status/1241870466282856451.

Amidst crippling sanctions which have limited medical supplies to Iran in the best of times and worsened the economic situation of the average Iranians, a pandemic is a near impossible task to handle. This, the corruption, mismanagement and plain stupidity apparent the Iranian government's actions has worsened the already devastating effects of the pandemic in a country that is densely populated. A simple example of such negligence was the deputy health minister of Iran, Iraj Harirchi, downplaying the scale of the pandemic in a press conference only to test positive for the virus a day after his speech.[7] The news and video of this incident circulated quickly on social media as people mocked the government's actions. Iranians mistrust in their government however, has a long history and such incidences only work to reaffirm this feeling. Such forms of virtual resistance have been present in the everyday life of people in Iran for over two decades and in the following sections, I will draw from some of the other major events of the last year in Iran to further demonstrate the trend.

March 2019 floods

The year 1396 begun with major floods across several regions in Iran caused by heavy and persistent rainfall for over two weeks. The hardest hit regions were faced with high casualties, destruction of their houses, their farms and cities' infrastructures. The government response to this disaster lacked both urgency and did not reflect the gravity of the disaster. The official reporting of the devastation was insufficient and distorted. During this time Instagram accounts of both Iranian residents and expatriates were swarming with videos of houses being washed away by the flood. People were using these channels to report more accurate statistics of casualties and to amplify the voices of the outraged victims who had not received the support they needed from their government. One can gauge the threat that such grassroots forms of broadcasting pose to the Iranian regime by looking at its response. According to an article in Iran News Wire for example, Iran's Attorney General, Mohammad Jafar Montazeri, had stated that publishing 'fake' news–which means any negative reports– about the 2019 flood in Iran on the Internet is a security violation and those found guilty will be prosecuted.[8]

November protests

On November 15th, 2019, after the sudden rise in oil prices and the subsequent rise in the price of all goods in Iran, people took to the streets. Protests irrupted

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[7] "Iran's deputy health minister: I have coronavirus," The Guardian, February 25, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/25/irans-deputy-health-minister-i-have-coronavirus.

[8] Adena Nima, "Iran Attorney General says posting flood news on social media 'disrupts security'," Iran News Wire, March 27, 2019, https://irannewswire.org/iran-attorney-general-says-posting-flood-news-on-social-media-disrupts-security/.

in several cities and location in Iran including Ahvaz, Mashahd and Tehran. Protestors parked their cars in the middle of the roads, blocking highways and streets. In some locations, demonstrators set fire to gas stations and cars. The scale of the protests reflected people's built-up frustration at their financial and political situation since the collapse of the nuclear deal.[9] To silence the protestors and undermine the protests the government induced an Internet shutdown beginning in a few cities and quickly advancing to the whole country. By November 16, Iran had entered a near complete Internet blackout. The Iranian expatriates however, joined in these protests through virtual means by drawing attention to the human rights violations inherent in an Internet blackout. Because the Internet shutdown was gradual, some images and video documentations of the protests were still leaked on the Internet and circulated quickly by those outside of Iran.

The Iranian government had learnt its lessons from the 2009 Green Movement and the role that social media platforms and communication apps played in the uprising. As Golkar explains, during the Green Movement "Social media also helped activists circulate information and news among people in a country where the majority of the media had been under severe state control." [10] This time, the total Internet shutdown was implemented quickly and worked effectively to disrupt any potential for a more organized movement. It as well blocked any further videos and images from circulating on the Internet at the time of the protests and, from any statistics about the number of casualties and arrests to be made public. The protests were crushed by the government through extreme violent force, thousands of arrests and hundreds of deaths. At this time, as Internet was gradually restored, people took to social media to report on the violence they had just witnessed and to circulate the images and names of those who were arrested, some without a trace, demanding for their safe release.

Boeing 737 crash

As tensions between Iran and the US escalated, due to the recent US assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad, on January 8th, a Ukrainian plane carrying 176 passengers and personnel crashed only minutes after take off from the Imam Khomeini International airport in Tehran. Reports of the crash stormed the news and social media channels and with the cause of the crash and the death toll still unknown many were already publicly speculating. For three days following the crash, the Iranian government attempted to pass off a mechanical malfunction as the cause of the incident to the public. For most Iranians and especially the friends and family of the

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[9] "The Guardian view on Iran's protests: unrest is crushed, unhappiness endures," The Guardian, November 26, 2019,
https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/nov/26/the-guardian-view-on-irans-protests-unrest-is-crushed-unhappiness-endures.

[10] Golkar, *The Whole World is Texting, 71.*

causalities, the prospect of a mechanical malfunction was the least devastating. Shortly following the crash however, a video footage of the incident taken by a civilian was surfacing online. When the online community, including journalists, further inspected the footage, they noticed an object hitting the plane prior to the explosion. This finding, as well as other inconsistencies, forced the Iranian government to reveal the truth. The plane was shot down by Iranian missiles through what the state called a 'tragic accident'. Iranians were devastated by the news and shocked by the ease in which their government lied for three days while knowing the cause of the crash. A translated section from an Instagram post of Hamed Esmaeilion, a father who lost his wife and daughter in the crash, reads; "if you wanted to kill these 176 people, wouldn't it have been easier if you had lined them up in front of the international airport and shot them? [...] so that at least they would not have been tormented in the sky for six minutes. At least we would have a body that we could feel. Maybe we could caress the hands of our children one last time. [...] come out and say why you did this? why did you do this?." [11] This feeling of betrayal was widespread and easily detectable both online and in the resulting protests.

After the government's public announcement, Iranians, yet again, took to the streets and social media to verbalize and publicize their anger and disbelief at the level state corruption. The government was again desperate to muffle the voices of the public and instil fear in those who tried to report the truth. As an example, the state tried to find and arrest the man who had shot the video of the plane crash.[12] The protests were yet again met with extreme police force. Families of the victims were threatened by the state and sometimes forced to hold private funerals. Hence, much of the grieving was moved to social media channels. Hashtags such as Boeing #737 or #176 were used to circulate news and information about the crash and mourn the deaths. Family and friends of the victims created online groups in which they demanded justice for the victims. Many also formed initiatives to raise funds for the victims' burials.

Conclusion

It can sometimes be difficult to pinpoint the extent to which each of these instances of virtual resistance and activism have direct effect on government policies and people's social reality but they are undoubtably part of the path to change. With Iran's population median age being around 30 years old, Internet is a tool used by the masses. As an example, an estimated 50 million people are

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[11] Hamed Esmaeilion (Hamedesmaeilion), " شما که می خواستید این ۱۷۶ نفر را بکشید آیا آسان تر نبود اگر همه را
جلوی فرودگاه بین المللی تان به صف می کردید و به رگبار می بستید ؟ حالا هی بیانیه می دهید ؟ هی کثافت تان را هم می زنید ؟ "
Instagram, Febrauay 5, 2020,
https://www.instagram.com/p/B8KkaZGpuj3/?igshid=n5a88xh3v6jg.

[12] Yaron Steinbuch, "Iran arrests person for sharing video of missile striking Ukrainian airliner," New York Post, January 15, 2020, https://nypost.com/2020/01/15/iran-arrests-person-for-sharing-video-of-missile-striking-ukrainian-airliner/.

currently using Telegram in Iran.[13] Hence, such grassroots broadcasting methods can potentially reach a large number of people. Though it is important not to depict a false utopian idea of virtual resistance in Iran, as much of the dangers of physical protests and resistance also exists in the online sphere, it is important to acknowledge its effectiveness and credit its often anonymous activists. As seen in the examples above, Iranians have embarked in both a virtual and a physical battle against their oppressive government and they are proving unstoppable. As Iran has been on the road to recovery in the fight against Covid-19, there are talks of returning the temporarily released prisoners back to prison and yet again, people have taken to social media to call attention to this and to demand the permanent release of the many political prisoners and those unjustly incarcerated. Furthermore, social media is still being used to bring attention to and demand answers regarding the victims of the events of last year as the Corona crisis has overtaken the news. We can see, this fight continues with full force.

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هم را تان کثافت هی ؟ دهید می بیانیه هی حالا ؟ بستید می رگبار به و کردید می صف به تان المللی بین فرودگاه
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[13] Mansoor Iqbal, "Telegram Revenue and Usage Statistics (2020)," Business of Apps, March 24, 2020, https://www.businessofapps.com/data/telegram-statistics/.

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