

Sonic Performances in a Time of Turmoil in Contemporary Iran

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ABSTRACT

This article examines sonic performances that refer to traumatic events in post-revolutionary Iran. It is based on archival and historical research, as well as on interviews with experts and field observations. It compares the sounds of the 1980s with those of contemporary Iran to understand the dynamics of generational transformation of cultural ideas about resilience and resistance. It begins by exploring the quality of resilience in a revolutionary society entangled in an eight-year war. This section examines the official elitist approach to art as ideological resilience. It also maps the dramatic mobilisations of the earlier revolutionary devotees who volunteered for the war. The ideological understanding of religion is compared to an unofficial bottom-up sonic performance of emotional resilience during the 1980s that stems from conventional popular perspectives on religion. Earlier articulations of art as resilience were expressed through the notion of serenity and embodied in a gentle approach to devotion and comprehension. In contrast, cultural resilience gradually transformed into a more antagonistic, segregationist and violent concept. The article reflects on earlier notions of resilience as set against an unstable post-war society defined by cleavage and disintegration. The 1990s was an era of cultural vacuum, political division and militaristic cultural suppression. It was characterised by a degeneration of earlier moral understandings of resilience, the over-flow of militarism into daily life, the top-down politicisation of morality and the de-politicisation of lifestyles. The article concludes with an account of the cultural transformations after 2009.

KEYWORDS

Iran; resilience; musicking; religion; maddāḥī

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INTRODUCTION

Successive Iranian states have been characterised by two pressing issues: foreign threat and internal disintegration. Outsiders were seen as a threat to Iran's political borders, while intrusion of local values was considered to endanger internal cohesion. The response in both cases was an authoritarian rule that relied on despotic forms of ideological control to impose a sense of collective identity. State-‘resilience’ thus entailed shunning practices that sought to avoid harm by excluding both the internal and external other.

In the post-1979 Islamic Republic, state officials began to rethink the concept of resilience in social/political terms of restoration and recovery. However, these narratives did not manifest as a coherent ideology. The official idea of restoration focused on cultural values that were assumed to be threatened by the West. In this regard, Iran's approach to resilience was akin to collective resistance to external forces. However, instead of restoring and maintaining local moral values, state officials used the need for state resilience as a justification to forge a political/social value system that did not exist before 1979.

As we shall see later, religion in Iran can be a powerful medium for emphasising serenity as a means of cultural resilience to instability, suffering and uncertainty. For instance, pain is understood among the majority of people through religious practices and values. These common spiritual values shape everyday moralities and vernacular ritual performative practice. Such performances draw on the historical events of religion – particularly Shi'ism – whose dynamics continue to be reflected in everyday life and politics in contemporary Iran.

The representation of Iran solely as a secular progressive state during the Pahlavi II regime (1941-1979) is as incomplete as the representation of Iran as a radically religious state since the 1979 revolution. The 1979 revolution was a manifestation of and response to the changes, contradictions and frustrations in Iranian society. It also exposed the wide diversity in how the different political groups which mobilised against the Shah perceived the resilience of their country and its governance. The art and cultural production of the 1970s further reflected the frustrations of this period as I explore below.

Following the regime change, war erupted between Iraq and Iran that lasted for eight years (1980-1988). The revolutionaries and Iranian people faced a foreign military threat. The war had a profound emotional impact in Iran, partly due to the alien agenda of an outsider antagonist, and partly because Iran had never been directly involved in a major conflict before. While Iran was still dealing with various forms of revolutionary ideas and political chaos, unorganised masses came together and voluntarily stood against military invasion. This mobilisation represented widespread popular resistance to the concepts of the revolution.

After the war, zealot revolutionary forces regained control of the political and religious ideology. Public mobilisation gradually dissipated. The reverberations of these political cleavages also weakened the prevailing forms of state resilience. During the decades following the war, in the 1990s and the 2000s, the state struggled to regain cultural authority. It deployed a diversity of means to reconcile with those who felt excluded, even reintroducing the once-banned practices of popular music. The cultural vacuum that had ensued from previous militarist approaches had left the cultural policies of the state ineffective. It was only after 2009 that the state became more influential in popular culture and began to reassert the forms of resilience and resistance of which it approved.

Recent academic work (Semati, 2017; Nooshin, 2017) on contemporary Iranian popular music has suggested an alternative interpretation of ‘cultural resistance’ by the youth against the state. Recalling the notion of shunning, this work implicitly suggests that cultural struggle in Iran is less an active resistance by which opposing groups directly target each other, than a means by which cultural practices become more conservative, as the youth seek to maintain their cultural values, enclosing them from possible harm by others. In this sense, resistance is the flip side of resilience. It tends to address ‘the harmful other’ indirectly.

The article will now compare the differences and similarities between music performances and religious rituals in general. These performances are the media through which resistance and resilience are articulated and contested. The discussion below emphasises the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, as well as recent episodes, such as the war in Syria and the nuclear sanctions against the Iranian state. The analysis focuses on the integration, mobilisation and manipulation of emotions and beliefs in such practices.

THE ELITE DRAMA OF RESILIENCE

During the 1980s, inhabitants of Tehran had a very different experience of the war compared to those at the front. Tehranis were six hundred miles from the frontlines. They suffered in financial and cultural terms, due to military priorities and suppressive top-down unifying policies. Tehran was also the city where most of the classically trained Iranian musicians lived. Most of these elite musicians were younger revivalists of the 1970s who broke away from the Shah’s cultural institutions after his armed confrontations with demonstrators (Hāšemi, 2016; Salehyar, 2018; Nooshin, 2014).

According to Mir‘alīnaqi, the Iranian music historian and journalist, the economic and cultural differences in Tehran did not lead to the creation of music that reflects the war. Instead, classically trained Iranian musicians responded to the bombardment of Tehran in the 1980s by the Iraqi air force by elaborating on the romantic repertoire of the Qajar era to produce ‘pacifying’ music. These productions were a means of distracting their “thoughts from the bitter reality of [the war] by projecting [an imagined] lost paradise of peace” (Mir‘alīnaqi, 1999, p. 57).

The Islamist revolutionaries who backed the clergy won political power in post-revolutionary Iran. For them, classical Iranian music was either associated with the Shah’s cultural policies or with the leftist organisations, which opposed the Shah. These zealot Islamist revolutionaries had issues with both associations. In other words, this music has never been an unequivocal cultural ‘sign’ of Islamic opposition to the Shah (Afshar, 2013; Breyley and Fatemi, 2016; Siamdoust, 2017).

In the 1960s, revivalist classical Iranian music had emerged as a form of maintaining cultural heritage and local values. By the 1970s, the elite discourse of revivalism was at best moulded to the demands of the revolution. It was never at the heart of it. Despite the approaches of the younger classical Iranian musicians, the Islamists remained sceptical about whether these ‘musical’ practices were morally acceptable, given conservative Islamist interpretations of what constituted ‘religious’ uprisings. Nonetheless, since the revivalist musicians had also opposed the Shah’s policies in the late 1970s, the Islamists did not entirely suppress their music practices after the revolution. The revolution thus did not ban the practice of music in Iran, but it did fundamentally shift the nature of ‘musicking’ (Small, 1998).

Other music genres, such as pop music, were considered unsuitable for the revolutionary moralities and could not be integrated into post-revolutionary culture. This absence of other genres thereby created a space in which classical Iranian music could monopolise performances in public (‘ališāpur, 2006). However, this still did not enable classical Iranian musicians to flourish. It only offered them a means of survival (Mir‘alinaḳi, 1999). They could perform in public only if they explicitly submitted to revolutionary ideals.

In the 1980s, despite the willingness of classical musicians to accommodate to state ideology, the revolutionary state was reluctant to incorporate the ‘pacifying’ classical Iranian music into its cultural agenda. The state could not fit the mystic/nationalist narrative of classical Iranian music together with its political reading of religion. The state was also unable to convince zealot Islamist revolutionaries that classical music was ‘legitimate’ and compatible with Islamic moral principles. Fatemi notes that given the conventional understanding of religious moralities, classical Iranian music was still a long way from being fully accepted (Breyley and Fatemi, 2016; Fatemi, 2016).

This cultural exclusion gradually caused frustration, hopelessness and a sense of alienation among classical Iranian musicians, eventually weakening their political integration into the state. By the 1990s, they returned to their earlier understanding of classical Iranian music in aesthetic and mystical terms (‘ališāpur, 2004). In the post-war era, official ideology was further distanced from conventional belief as state and musicians developed a mutual distrust, which only increased when officials pushed for militarist management of the country (Cohen and Lewin, 2019).

Since the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, the dilemma for both the revolutionary state and the classical Iranian musicians was how to showcase their ‘valuable’ contributions to Iran. Classical Iranian music was no longer a site of political resilience nor was it a mechanism for ‘pacification’. The state did not ‘need’ such a musical practice anymore because the war was over. The state was also preoccupied with trying to justify its political values in a post-war society. State officials began to move towards de-politicisation and the re-articulation of concepts such as contribution, societal resilience and cultural integration (Ḳōyi, 2016).

Such top-down depoliticisation was primarily manifest in the re-articulation of the concept of pacification since this was also linked to the censorship of popular music. In 1979, Ḳōmeyni had referred to the practice of pop music – in TV music contests, clubs and cabarets – as ‘narcotic’ (Ḳōmeyni, 2010, p. 199). He viewed popular music as associated with intoxication, excess and other deviant effects. In other words, he defined pacification as a means of depoliticisation in which popular music was a form of aberration in relation to the pro-cleric ‘political’ mobilisation of people against the Shah.

The clergy was well aware that these practices could also be used to exploit people’s moral vulnerability (Fischer, 2003). Ḳōmeyni emphasised the connection between the emerging popularity of pop music among the youth, and its associated immoralities such as drinking and dancing with the opposite sex. Shaming the advocates of popular music, he promoted the supervision of morality by religious authorities, which had a negative impact on musical practices. After the revolution, some groups of classical musicians and poets helped the state to regulate censorship against music to ‘filter’ out the ‘undesirable’ and ‘anti-revolutionary’ practices of music (Fatemi, audio interview 2016). These transformations in musicking also altered the post-revolutionary reading of narcotic pacification, whereby the state

had temporarily integrated narcotic/depoliticising music to preserve the political order and the status quo.

The cultural agenda of the state had always been to filter and select its desired meanings from ongoing cultural practices. In other words, the state judged these practices by their political ‘commitment’ to the establishment. The only way for classical Iranian music to be tolerated was thus to present itself as a means of political pacification. Whereas, the previous understanding of pacification had resulted in mobilisation for war, the later articulation of the term emphasised the deepening of commitment to the post-war political values of the state. Musical practices otherwise at risk of censorship and rejection could thus be made acceptable if they could ‘prove’ how they contributed to the state agenda. In the 1980s, classical Iranian musicians were therefore obliged to prove the ‘value’ of their music, instead of expressing their spontaneous sympathy with traumatic events as had been the case during the war (Rasuli, 2006).

THE SERENE REVERENCE OF SPIRITUAL RESILIENCE

One of the key aspects of Shia Islam in contemporary Iran is a (somewhat romantic) understanding of putting the achievement of a higher purpose above individual happiness, prosperity and well-being. This is not necessarily limited to Islamists or religious people. It has become an unconscious moral convention. During military conflicts, the idea manifests itself through the concept of *šahādat* (martyrdom). Not quite the same as the Christian idea of martyrdom, *šahādat* represents dying for a higher purpose. *Šahādat* is not self-promotional, self-rewarding nor is it the act of dying or killing. It is the willingness to volunteer and to risk one’s life for religion. A martyr, by contrast, defines a perfect human being.

The most iconic event in the history of Islam in this regard is the *šahādat* of Imam Ḥōseyn – the third Shia Imam and the grandson of the Prophet – on the 10th of Muharram (Arabic calendar month) 680 AD in Karbala, Iraq. Karbala epitomises the courage of Imam Ḥōseyn in standing against his enemies despite the opponent’s superior military strength. This narrative reverses fear, hopelessness and sorrow and turns them into courage, commitment and, more importantly, self-sacrifice. For centuries many different musical traditions and rituals have been associated with this event (Williamson Fa, 2017). The annual rituals that are held for ten days in Iran are mainly a reminder of such values. They are popular events held by communities across the country and come in many forms and varieties. *Maddāḥi* is the most common sonic performance of this tragedy in Iran. It is the sound of cultural resilience during turmoil. This medium not only minimises the intensity of the hurt but also reaffirms dignity.

In Shi’ism, pain is necessary in order to become ‘fully human’. One needs to go through pain to understand the *šahādat* – the willingness to endure hardships in reaching for the sacred. Acknowledgement of pain is part of the sense of guilt Shi’ites are expected to feel (Khosravi, 2008, p. 82). “Enduring pain [...] and suffering is seen as a virtue [...] to the extent that [it] becomes a hallmark of dignity and inner purity. Emotional pain is associated with inner purity, conscience, and responsibility” (Khosravi, 2017, pp. 211-212). Enduring pain is, therefore, a coping mechanism. These conceptual frameworks define the perception of spiritual resilience.

A conventional yet reverent reading of Islam governed a symbolic reading of the war. This reading takes Kōmeyni as the epitome of serenity. Kōmeyni managed to represent an Islam of the suppressed yet honest working classes who joined the

uprising against the Shah. He articulated the revolution as a spiritual uprising against the forces of evil and those Muslims participating in it as the devotees. The clergy who backed K̄ōmeyni re-articulated the revolution not as political action, but as a spiritual unity of authentic Muslims who gathered to defend their dignity.

Morally correct musicking practices for the fight against evil should simultaneously relate to conventional religiosity and the turmoil of war. The music practices from the war zones had roots in religion and local musical cultures. This specific musicking tied conventional religiosity and the epic drama together with the war. Some talented young musicians represented this music genre more homogeneously. Poetic mourning embodying local music genres such as *nowḥeh* (dirge) and *maddāḥi* (eulogy) transformed the qualities associated with modern war by incorporating the epics and stories of religious saints as these were locally understood. Thus, the bleak sounds that accompanied the Muharram narratives celebrating the actions of Ḥōseyn at Karbala articulated the idea that Iran was opposed to an unjust war (with Iraq), which had been the cause of so much sorrow.

However, after the war with Iraq, the state tried to keep the political and militaristic aspects of the Muharram narrative separate from the emotional mourning for a religious saint. The revolutionary state instead emphasised expression of political commitment through religious understanding of *ṣahādat* and devotion. In addition to the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of cultural practices, there have been other grassroots practices contributing to the sonic performance of resilience during the war. The following section looks at the conventional religiosity of bottom-up musicking. I explore the shifting relationship between religion, sonic performances and political participation.

THE TRANSMOGRIFICATION OF POLITICAL INTEGRATION AS RELIGIOUS RESILIENCE

The traditional clergy has played a crucial part in Muharram rituals in Iran for centuries. They are well aware of the cross-generational popularity, moral significance and political functionality of this event among Iranians. Muharram is the intersection of the religious values of the people with diverse backgrounds and the state's political reading of Shi'ism. For instance, replacing the Islamic calendar with the ancient Iranian calendar in 1974 was widely considered an affront to the calendrical recognition of specific religious days and months like Muharram. Subsequently, the Muharram narrative underpinned the Islamist uprising against the Shah as an anti-Shia antagonist and large-scale public Muharram commemorations preceded his downfall by a few months.

After the revolution, the practices related to Muharram increased dramatically and officials referred to them more frequently. The post-revolutionary state in Iran seized any opportunity to use this popular religious event in order to justify the hierarchy of clerical power. It depicted the Iraq-Iran war as a modern-day Karbala, where Ḥōseyn had been massacred in 680 AD. Eventually, the leader of the Islamic Republic came to represent Imam Ḥōseyn himself. The post-1979 Muharram became as much an opportunity for the de-politicisation and/or re-politicisation of the concepts of pain, endurance and resilience against the anti-Shia agenda as a season for displaying religiosity. The political intervention of religion demanded that the masses contributed to the maintenance of a religious state, as much as it commanded respect for the Imams. Loyalty to the state thus translated into religious resilience only in terms of political integration with the state. Furthermore, resilience was here understood by state officials to be both a means of political

resistance against the west, and an alternative narrative to the state's politics inside Iran, (Rahbar, 1990).

The depoliticisation and re-articulation of such religious values into a revolutionary commitment have deeper origins among grassroots revolutionary youth like Kāmṛān 'āvini. Kāmṛān (Mōrteżā) 'āvini (1947-1993) studied arts at the University of Tehran during the 1970s. He became symbolic of the leaders of the Islamic Republic when in 1979 he turned into a 'true' revolutionary and renounced his Western hippie and arty past. The state marked his birthday as the "day of revolutionary art" after naming him "the authentic artist of the revolution". He is an influential figure among the zealot revolutionaries who want to propagate political values through cultural forms as a revival of religious principles.

Kāmṛān judged the practice of music by its (ideological) content and by the agenda of the musician. Therefore, he did not agree with classical Iranian music at the dawn of the revolution. Ancient nationalism was the core of the Pahlavi regime's discourse. It took Iranian mysticism as central to understanding Islam in Iran. This discourse was also closely tied to classical poetry and mysticism and it defined one aspect of elitism in classical Iranian music. Kāmṛān 'āvini turned such nationalism upside down, prioritising instead the clerical understanding of Islam ('āvini, 2011). He transmogrified the meaning of nationalism by attaching concepts of value, commitment and the mission of artists in a revolutionary state to their loyalty to the clerics' political power. Integration into the political system therefore required unequivocal devotion.

Since the 1980s, these changes have been accompanied by a re-articulation of the term *'arzeš*. For the state, *'arzeši* ('valuing') is an individual attribute that entails devotion to the 'higher aims of the revolution' and a commitment to seeing things through the state's political reading of religion. A related term, *mōte'ahhed* (committed), conveys a similar idea but requires a show of passion and, more significantly, loyalty to the revolution and particularly to its leader. These concepts are embedded in the story of Imam Hōseyṅ (Bajoghli and Moosavi, 2017) and provided the bases on which clerics questioned people's morals by contrasting them to the values of the revolution. Classical Iranian music was one example of a practice whose morality was questioned during the first decade of post-revolutionary Iran. It could hardly prove itself to be a proper *mōte'ahhed* revolutionary art.

The next section explores the political alignment of meanings to show how militarism from the war began to seep back into daily life and popular culture after the war ended.

THE DEGENERATION OF THE MORALITIES OF RESILIENCE: ELUSIVE MILITARISM

On 20 August 1988, the state agreed to UNSC resolution 598 (United Nations 1987) and the war ended. Iran now entered a post-war cultural vacuum. The conceptual re-articulations of moral values through the on-going practice of war suddenly came to an end, a dramatic change that resonated across Iranian society and daily life.

Yet in another sense the war had never ended in Iran (Behrouzan, 2016; Varij Kāzemi, 2016). Despite the UN resolution, a militarist agenda was still perceptible in everyday life, which now became a site of constant *mōkāvemat* (resistance). The displacement of life by war, the longevity of the war and the era of suppressed cultural expression had undermined popular identification with revolutionary political resilience. The other side of the cultural vacuum was the antagonistic

political cleavages inside the establishment, cleavages that metamorphosed into 'rage' in everyday matters and religious rituals.

The influence of militarism and the excessive focus on political integration forced people to find resilience – as restoration – in joy. For instance, some groups of people tried to smuggle diaspora pop music into Iran as their only means of finding hope, sometimes with ironic and contradictory outcomes:

The repression of emotional responses is also visible, and manifested as anxiety, in diaspora pop music productions. This manifestation of anxiety is a coping mechanism. After the 1979 revolution, and especially during the war, the expression of happiness had been implicitly considered as immoral. Together with the initial ban of popular music, the increasing social and political anxieties caused a demand for joyful music during the 1980s. However, sometimes the content of the lyrics was totally in contrast with the joyful sonic and the happy-faced dance accompanying it. It was to an extent as if musicians set to bring joy and ecstasy by all means, even if they sing a sad song. (Harandi and Harandi to Hashemi, pers. comm. 29 March 2019).

State officials also encouraged the cultural reproduction of the war-time virtues, such as *'arzeši* music (Cohen and Lewin, 2019; Bajoghli, 2015). Mōh̄sen Šahrnāzdār, a young Iranian anthropologist, reminds us that it is the collectivity of a nation that determines the creation of resilient music, not propaganda or state control of the creative process (Kandī, 2018).

Maddāhi and *nowḥeh* remain the most popular music genres in Iran. *Maddāh*s (people who perform *maddāhi*) could always attract larger audiences than could musicians. Mir'alinaḳi accurately observes that the state cannot control or contain the behaviour of these audiences. "A broad spectrum of [them] has a more dogmatic attitude than the state", he adds. "Most of their violent yet self-satisfactory behaviours are due to the[ir] inferiority complexes as a result of pervasive suppression" (interview with Hasehmi, 2016). He also notes that cultural suppression is not exclusive to the state. It is still an unconscious part of the conventions in Iran (Mir'alinaḳi, 2016).

The post-war cultural vacuum is also visible among some lower-class young people who are presumed to be more supportive of state ideology. Although they are part of the same social stratum mobilised by the Islamists in 1979, it seems that state officials have difficulty in comprehensively integrating their cultural values into the revolution. For instance, some *maddāhi* practices are more common among such subaltern social classes.

These trends of *maddāhi* have emerged since the 2000s. They are culturally distinct from the inclusive religious agenda of *maddāhi* during the 1980s. They adopt a more aggressive narrative, are more hyper-emotionally rhythmic and are socially exclusive. Since the Muharram incidents during the post-election demonstrations on 27-30 December 2009, the militaristic side of the official narrative of Muharram has dominated public discourse. This narrative re-articulates the status of the cleric as supreme jurist (the leader) who is as holy as the third Imam, while the anti-state demonstrators are represented as being as evil as those who had fought against the Imam in 680 AD. The attitude of these groups only loosely aligns with the religious ideology of the state and departs substantially from that of the traditional conservative clergy. Yet officials still mobilise these groups as a medium of violent suppression of other narratives that have even less in common with the Islamic Republic.

The practitioners of such *maddāhi* practices have some shared values and common conventions. It does not matter if they proactively support the state. Their reductionist understanding of religion as Sharia rules and conventional moralities is what principally matters. They have an antagonistic ‘gang’ attitude. For instance, they do not welcome non-traditional and privileged middle classes and are antagonistic to other (higher) strata. They are consequently an asset for the state as a tool of suppression.

Nevertheless, conventions are not just about suppression and religious dogma. They embrace a wide range of moralities. As in many other societies, conventions in Iran become more suppressive in the face of rapid social and political change and in context of shifting socio-cultural meanings in discursive practice.

The failure of the state in governmentality and inclusion not only violates the conventions and local values of religiosity but consolidates differences into opposition. Post-revolutionary society is not just recategorised as a whole; the mutual relationships between the categories are dismantled further. They are more reluctant to communicate. As a result, the once nation-wide momentum of resilience in the revolution against the Shah shatters into diverse antagonisms and opposing cleavages.

In this regard, those groups of people who support the state have separate understandings of resilience from those who are located further from the establishment. The former tends to understand resilience through the specific official political reading of religion. Those groups of people who are located further from the state maintain more independent sonic practices of resilience, such as holding religious events in their local communities and consuming (popular) music. They tend to have a personal take on religiosity, community values and mysticism.

State propaganda has an unsuccessful record of generating widespread and universal support. The unilateral overemphasis on politics has always failed to communicate with the masses. The optimum aim is to animate the public with *'arzeši* religious values. However, as the state views popular culture as a stigma and potential threat, the loyalty of the producers of a ‘cleansed’ popular culture has been a state priority. As a result, the state could never quite reach the artists nor had enough popular artists on their political side.

There are two issues with *'arzeši* music. The first issue is the failure of official hegemonic practices in popularising the revolutionary *'arzeš*, especially after the 1980s. This terminology has a long history of stigma, suppression and elimination rather than of valuing. The second issue is the dilemma of the feasibility of popular music for the lifestyle of zealot revolutionaries. Islamic moralities can at best tolerate such practices. Different professional languages exacerbate this cultural gap between musician and revolutionary, thereby hindering the engagement of revolutionary devotees in producing the ‘proper’ music.

Some officials still advocate top-down socio-cultural engineering of official political resilience. They try to convince people to back the state and especially its leader. However, most of the time they fail to reach out much beyond an ideologically enclosed community. Jašn-vāreh-ye Mōḳāvemāt (The Festival of Defence/Resistance) is one of the most significant of such attempts. It is an outcome of the fusion of Kāmrān ‘āvini’s ideas on committed art and the political attitudes of the modern-day state in Iran.

The rest of the article looks at one of the central figures in this festival to understand the dynamics of policies of politico-cultural resistance.

THE DEGENERATION OF POLITICAL RESILIENCE: THE STIGMA OF 'ARZEŠ, A SHORT CASE STUDY

Hāmed Zamāni (1988-) is a vocalist from Meymeh, Isfahan. His family encouraged him to learn to recite the Quran and *maddāhi* during his childhood as well as classical Iranian music vocals. However, Zamāni turned towards pop music in 2004. Love songs were the central theme of his work for a few years. He began performing 'arzeši content in 2005 (Zamāni, 2016b).

In his mid-career interviews, Zamāni never mentioned his long engagement with pop music. Instead, discussions were only about 'arzeši music. "I focused on music once I realised that I ha[d] something important to say. Some arguments that should have been said but have never been mentioned in [pop] music". He then added that "fame is the means of being heard. There is no point in making music if I [cannot bolster] my ideological thoughts explicitly, which in turn makes me an enemy of many who disagree with such ideology" (Zamāni, 2014b).

Zamāni became famous for his vocals over the ending credits of television programmes broadcast by Şedā-ō-simā (aka IRIB, The Islamic Republic of Iranian Broadcasting, the official media services), such as the music video about the Gaza strikes in 2014; a satiric video clip in which Israeli military express their pleasure in killing the Palestinians (Zamāni, 2014a). Şedā-ō-simā also broadcast the political series, *Diruz 'emruz Fardā* (Yesterday Today Tomorrow). This series reported on the xenophobic critique of the 2009 *Green Movement*. Zamāni also made the music for this series.

This inclusion of pop music in public political debate was not the result of a clear strategic plan. The producer of these programmes suggested it to Zamāni and convinced officials at Şedā-ō-simā to put soundtracks to the political talk shows; something that is still popular among melodramatic TV series in Iran (Zamāni, 2014b). "In the beginning, everybody in the official organisations told me that we d[id] not want the medium of music [to be included in our revolutionary purposes]", Zamāni mentioned with surprise (Zamāni, 2014b).

These productions failed to convince the general public of the state's revolutionary goals. In fact, in 2009 the broadcasts worked against the state, since listeners did not believe their content, and it found itself the focus of unrest and the subject of rejection because of violent suppression. One principal reason for the state's miscommunication of its political narratives is its failure to listen to other voices. State officials fail to look beyond their own supportive circle and to consider the perspectives of alternative cultural and political social groups in Iran. Instead, they attempt to impose a particular cultural and political narrative by any possible means, including popular music. Ignoring the voices of the anti-state demonstrators just made this miscommunication worse. These broadcasts represent the enclosing of the state against the rising voices more than the means of mobilising potential supporters against the unrest. Zamāni inevitably became unpopular once he proudly took part in producing the soundtrack of the propaganda movie *Ḳallādeh-hā-ye Ṭalā* (The Golden Collars) (Ṭālebi, 2012).

Between 2009 and 2016, Zamāni regularly released records in response to political or religious events such as the death or birth of Imams and to mark ideologically important days in the post-revolutionary calendar. More recently, he has focused on the issue of military intervention of Sepāh (the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps or IRGC) in Syria, wrapping this in a rhetoric of 'defending the holy Shia shrines'

from Western-Saudi-Israeli-funded ISIS. The cultural production of Sepāh in supporting such artists, the presence of General Sōleymāni on Instagram and other social media, and the rhetoric of Şedā-ō-simā, work together to promote the heroism of Sepāh and make the Iranians appreciate their ‘defence’ (Akhavan, 2015; 2018).

Rather than penetrating popular culture, Zamāni’s music is more an attempt to introduce a parallel popular culture for the young ‘*arzeši*’ supporters of the state. For instance, when he released *Marg bar ‘āmrikā* (Down with the USA) in 2013 at the former embassy of the United States in Tehran and now the Muzeh-ye Sizdah-e ‘ābān (The Museum of the 4 November 1979), he depicted ‘resistance’ to state collaboration with the West. His song was a reminder to the Ruḥāni government of the revolutionary values, goals and demands in context of the government’s nuclear deal with the USA (and UN and EU).

Zamāni wanted to fill the social gap for the religious youth who did not listen to pop music. He realised that there was no ‘*arzeši*’ pop star. While they wanted to have a music idol, their lifestyles and the culture of their families barely recognised the existence of popular music. Zamāni’s aspirations did not go unchallenged and occasionally he was threatened by revolutionary and religious zealots who demanded he stop making pop music for their ‘sacred’ revolution.

The state gradually reduced its support for Zamāni and began investing in other artists with greater popularity. At this time Iran also began to experience greater financial challenges. This growing precarity added to the irrelevance of Zamāni’s music, which the general public now also began to find offensive. He could no longer contain the cultural tension and took a step back to compose songs addressing the financial hardships of the period. Still, he adopted a conservative path and blamed the few corrupt officials for the mess, not the general idea of the post-revolutionary state.

If I keep making propaganda music, then people are right to judge me as a hypocrite and servile. Now, I claim to produce music to *mōbārezeh* against domestic or foreign tyranny. No one dares to sing about the social, political or financial tyranny. However, I do because I do not want to betray my people (Zamāni, interview with Hashemi, July, 2016).

The growing gap between ‘*arzeši*’ and popular moralities was clear once Zamāni distanced himself from the genre. He rebranded his music from ‘*arzeši*’ to music for ‘*mōbārezeh*’ or ‘*istādegi*’ (resistance) and finally to ‘*ejtemā’i*’ (socially concerned) and *mardōmi* (in support of ordinary people, popular) (Zamāni 2017).

In 2016, he released the single, ‘Haft-Tir’ (revolver). Haft-Tir also resonates with the date – 7th of Tir 1360, 28 June 1981 – when a bomb exploded in the headquarters of the Islamic Republic party in Tehran and killed the head of the Supreme Court of Iran along with many other governmental and parliamentary figures. Zamāni argues that:

In ‘Haft-Tir’, I am raging against the trilogy of the political, economic and cultural Ṭāḡut (tyranny) which is also the basis of my other songs’. He adds that ‘now that I release Haft-Tir, the intellectual stratum realise that we have more in common. I am attracting the grey audience towards my discourse, and this is what I wanted (Musīki-ye Mā 2016).

He added in a later interview that:

The basis of religiosity is the social justice that gives meaning to the religion. Other than that, being a religious person is worthless and free from meaning.

[...] I hope that now I attract real Muslim supporters who have the concerns of social justice rather than just keeping a religious face. I do not just want to attract the public, and I do not step back from my values. I am just saying people would be more attracted to my music; they see my argument in a clearer way. [...] I am saying that the malfunction, betrayal and corruption should not have been understood as the discourse of the revolution and Islam' (Zamāni, interview with Hashemi, 2016b).

Zamāni believes that he is now "the voice of the voiceless" (Zamāni, interview with Hasehemi, 2016b), who once represented gentrified, state-supporting young people. His changing attitude from *'arzeši* to *mardōmi* (in support of ordinary people) also points to the gaps between officials and the general public.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown how political space in Iran has grown out of negativity and antagonism in socio-political affairs since 1979. It has addressed how proactive resilience has underpinned the practices and sonic performances of resilience. Such resilience has always been reproduced and articulated through the culture of the general public in Iran, not by the state. While there are various forms of sonic cultures in Iran with unique sonic identities, the emerging and growing urban culture in Iran finds its values in cultural heritage(s) from across the country, not in elite discourse. This is not to say that elite discourse has never manipulated public culture, but it has always been able to do so only when it resonated with locally embedded and popular themes and forms of expression. Thus, the transmutation of cultural practices has largely been unsuccessful or, at best, was of limited success. As we saw earlier, forms of resilience developed by the elites, such as classical Iranian revivalism during the 1960s and 1970s, ultimately reverted to a general cultural understanding of national narratives packed with mystical and religious moralities.

The music and religious rituals of the war in the 1980s were mostly proactive bottom-up practices arising from the 1979 revolution. Although these sonic performances were also encouraged by the state in the early 1980s as a medium of propaganda, there remained a vernacular integrity behind public participation.

Yet, the state has had a paradoxical approach to mobilising and encouraging the integration of potentially supportive and 'useful' musicians. These contradictions have resulted in incomprehensibility, not just among the people, but also among the state officials themselves. They have led to the demise of the sense of belonging and a widespread degeneration of resilience. As a result, the public performance of earlier forms of musical resilience were transformed into a superficial devotion and religious dramatisation of nationality, ethnic diversity and community.

On top of that, the exclusionary approach of the state, together with the cleavages among the artists and the post-war transformations, hindered the formation of collective, nation-wide support for the politics of the state and pushed Iranian cultural practices further towards division and antagonism. The antagonistic re-articulation of divisive cultural meanings generated a dynamic of mutual 'otherness' between the state and the people that resulted in a scattered and sometimes paradoxical practice of resilience that lacked any common underpinning morality or shared sense of values.

After the war, this antagonism drained the creativity and frank engagement of the public and artists. The 'state' and 'the people' developed enclosed narratives of resilience to maintain their own set of values. The top-down agenda of the state

explicitly attempted to ‘penetrate’ public opinion by producing populist propaganda music relating, for example, to the 2009 uprisings, the war in Syria and the nuclear deal. As we have seen, such contrasts created dramatic shifts in the understanding of the concepts of resistance and resilience along with structural cleavage.

Today, the state claims official religious integrity in Iran obscuring the multiplicity of religious views of Shi’ism in order to strengthen Islamic ideological leadership. It forges politics as the religion of the supporters and the leader of the revolution as the saint. The ultimate goal of the state is the expansion of such political religion nationally. One recent and disturbing outcome of this paradigm shift is the transformation of the Iranian-Arabic racial enmity into a Shia-Sunni religious antipathy, which is manifest in the ongoing Syrian conflict.

TRANSLITERATION GUIDE

The article uses Encyclopædia Iranica's latest update for the transliteration of Farsi text to Roman script. The 'eh' at the end of some words is usually not pronounced. Throughout the text, single quotation marks are used in proper names in addition to their use in the transliteration of الف and ع. The Table below provides the transliteration guide in three columns with the Iranian characters on the left (C for consonant and V for vowels), Iranica transliteration in the middle (EI) and the pronunciation (P) on the right of each set of three columns.

C	EI	P	C	EI	P	V	EI	P
ا	' , —	—	ص	s	s	اَ	a	a
ب	b	b	ض	ẓ	z	اُ	ō	ɔ:
پ	p	p	ط	ṭ	t	اَو	u	u:
ت	t	t	ظ	ẓ	z	اِ	e	e, ə
ث	ṭ	s	ع	'	—	اَآ	ā	ɑ:
ج	j	dʒ	غ	ġ	ɾ	اَآ	ā	ɑ:
چ	č	tʃ	ف	f	f	اَآ	ā	ɑ:
ح	ḥ	h	ق	q	ɾ	اَآ	ā	ɑ:
خ	k	x	ک	k	k	اُو	u	u:
د	d	d	گ	g	g	اِی	i, ē	i:
ذ	d̪	z	ل	l	l	اَو	ow, aw	əʊ, aʊ
ر	r	r	م	m	M	اَآ	ey, ay	eɪ
ز	z	z	ن	n	N	اِی	—e, —ye	jɛ
ژ	ž	ʒ	و	v, w	v	اَآ	—ye	jɛ
س	s	s	ه	h	w	ء	'	—
ش	š	ʃ	ی	y	j	اُو	'	—
						اِی	'	—

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