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The Active Networks of the Iranian Underground-HipHop Scene and its References to Resistance Movements in Iran

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The Active Networks of the Iranian Underground-HipHop Scene and its References to Resistance Movements in Iran

MA International Relations Thesis

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This dissertation is dedicated to the father of Amir -Hossein Moradi, who took his own life so that his son might live on.

Amir-Hossein is currently imprisoned. Years ago, he and I used to listen to some of the songs explored in this dissertation together.

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Introduction

“Human beings are members of a whole,
In creation of one essence and soul.
If one member is afflicted with pain,
Other members uneasy will remain.
If you've no sympathy for human pain,
The name of human you cannot retain!”¹

In the previous two decades, the Iranian art scene has experienced tremendous changes from within and has arguably flourished internationally due to the socio-political changes within the country. Multiple documentaries, films and music productions have achieved international recognition and have been nominated for acclaimed international awards.² This has led to the emergence of new artistic discourses.³ One reoccurring theme in the work of artists, is the re-usage of Persian Poetry in different forms. Persian Poetry is retractable in many contemporary artistic creations including paintings, cinema and music. This usage of poetry is related to the important role that poetry has always played within the Iranian history.⁴

From a young age on, Iranian children are presented with the richness of Persian poetry. At school, children are thought to memorize and resonate poems by famous Persian poets such as Hafiz, Rumi, Saadi and Ferdowsi. Persian speakers are widely known for using poetry in their daily conversations and incorporate old poems in contemporary art forms such as classical music, cinema and hip-hop while relating it to their present-day societal dilemma's such as politics.⁵ It is even common to use poetry in formal settings. One example amidst many is

¹ Saadi Shirazi, “The Children of Adam,” in *Saadi. Gulistan*, trans. M Aryanpoor.

² arah Nayeri, “As Tensions Rise With Iran, So Does Interest in Art It Inspired,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, March 8, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/08/arts/iran-artists.html>.

³ Hamid Keshmirshakan. "Contemporary Iranian Art: The Emergence of New Artistic Discourses." *Iranian Studies* 40, no. 3 (2007).

⁴ G.J Breyley. "Waking Up the Colours: Memory and Allegory in Iranian Hip Hop and Ambient Music." *Australian Literary Studies* 29, no. 1-2 (2014): P.107.

⁵ Neima Jahromi, “Poetry and Politics in Iran,” (July 14, 2015), <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/poetry-and-politics-in-iran>.

Iran's former foreign affairs minister, Javad Zarif, who addressed the global community in English and ended his speech with a poem by Ferdowsi.⁶

In the previous decade, alongside other artistic methods, Persian poetry has received an increased amount of international recognition mainly related to the spread of information through internet and its social media channels. This process has led to the evolvement of Persian poetry throughout the years and has led to the creation of a space for the younger generation to combine their love and interest for classical poetic texts by transforming it into modern pieces through different artistic styles.⁷ Resulting in the creation of resilient subcultures such as the Iranian underground hip-hop scene.⁸

The Iranian underground hip-hop scene has from its inception on struggled to create a free space within Iran. The censorship and state control restrict freedom of speech for artists in many ways. The Islamic Republic of Iran's government is internationally criticized for its violations of basic human rights of its citizens. Organizations such as the United Nations and human rights NGOs condemned the regime for its harsh measurements against civilians.⁹ These violations are evidently also visible when studying this particular scene.

Despite of all the strict measurements imposed, the government has not been able to fully silence dissent. In contrary, resistance movements continue to play a crucial role within Iran. The violation of individual rights together with a variety of other socio-political factors have led to an increased number of protests in the previous decades. Three major examples are the July 1999 student protests, the June 2009 Green Wave movement and the November 2019 protests also referred to as Bloody November. All three movements were vanquished by Iran's security forces leading to thousands of registered arrests and a high number of deaths of innocent protesters and bystanders.¹⁰

Until now, participation during protests has taken shape through different methods and channels. Some individuals joined the crowds and were physically present during the demonstrations while others contributed through different outputs such as filming

⁶ Javad Zarif. "Iran's Message: Our Counterparts Must Choose Between Agreement and Coercion," accessed October 22, 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=cw71HMKDpco&ab_channel=javadzarif. 00:03:31

⁷ G.J Breyley. "Waking Up the Colours: Memory and Allegory in Iranian Hip Hop and Ambient Music." *Australian Literary Studies* 29, no. 1-2 (2014): P.108.

⁸ 'Persian underground hip-hop scene' in Farsi written as: 'رپ زیرزمینی' / رپ فارسی

⁹ Shabnam Moinipour. "UN Treaty-based Bodies and the Islamic Republic of Iran: Human Rights Dialogue (1990–2016)." *Cogent Social Sciences*, (2018). Vol.4 no. 1. P.2

¹⁰ Amnesty International, "Iran: Death toll from bloody crackdown on protests rises to 208" (2 December 2019) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/12/iran-death-toll-from-bloody-crackdown-on-protests-rises-to-208/>

documentaries, reporting live from the streets, writing blogs or recording politically loaded music.

This thesis will focus on resistance through music and specifically, the Iranian underground hip-hop scene and the available recordings produced by artists from within this scene that are using a new method of resistance to add knowledge to our understanding about the resistance events that have taken place within the country.

The Iranian underground hip-hop scene consists of a network of artists that are directly engaged with ongoing socio-political discourses in the country. Their creations are an extension of the movements that have taken place so far. The creation of such scenes by the youth and their usage of this new method to resist has arguably added a new unique character to the already existing movements. The youth use hip-hop to create a new language of liberty within their suppressed physical environment.

What is meant by freedom and liberty throughout this thesis is referring to the concepts of individual expression rights, equality and human rights. These concepts have been chosen as they are important factors behind the existence of civil movements in Iran. Throughout this thesis, the concepts of resistance and youth will be analyzed through a content analysis. By analyzing the creations of the artists active within this scene, the thesis aims to understand how the above-mentioned themes are connected to the Iranian underground hip-hop scene.

This thesis argues that it is crucial to acknowledge the Iranian underground hip-hop scene, as they have shaped their own unique and novel method of conducting resistance by keeping discourses related to resistance circulating in society, even at times when no resistance movements are taking place in the country. They interact with the movements through storytelling methods in their songs. Their creations lead to the survival of collective memories that in other way would be forgotten. One example is the usage of whining voices during protests in the rap tracks or the inclusion in the tracks of voice-memos of mothers who have lost a child during the protest.¹¹ This has led to the creation of new and evolved knowledge through the usage of a hip-hop language, surpassing the existing protest languages such as slogans used during demonstrations.

I further argue that by recognizing sub-cultures such as the Iranian underground hip-hop scene, the events and the memories related to dissident movements in Iran are saved and become unerasable. The recognition of this group adds additional value to our understanding

¹¹ Examples of such tracks are Hichkas' 'Dastasho Moch Karde' and Ashkan Fadaei's 'Az Karaj ta Langerud.'

of the contemporary socio-political movements in Iran and allows us to broaden our understanding on resistance movements in a broader scope.

Furthermore, this thesis will elaborate on the concepts of non-violent resistance and non-movement resistance movements. These concepts have been introduced by Erica Chenoweth and Asef Bayat. The work of these two scholars is of great importance for this research as they allow the Iranian hip-hop scene to be placed within an already existing framework of academic research. Chenoweth's concept builds upon the method of non-violent resistance which is a method used by the Iranian hip-hop scene to engage in dissident movements. Bayat's acknowledgment of the passive networks created by the youth recognizes the activity of this group but as this research evolves, it becomes evident that certain academic gaps, such as a lack of focus on the Iranian underground hip-hop scene and unacknowledged youth movements exist.

The primary focus of this thesis is to answer the following research question: How does the Iranian Hip-hop scene distinguish its method of resistance from the already existing resistance movements within Iran? This will be explored by conducting a content analysis on the rap recordings and connecting this to the existing sources on resistance movements and the Iranian hip-hop scene's relation with these movements. Information in this thesis will be retrieved from translation and interpretation of underground-rap music and the study of academic literature published on the topic of resistance movements in Iran.

In order to avoid a too broad approach, this study will only focus on the periods from 1999 to 2019. The reason behind choosing this specific period is as follows: 1) A number of resistance movements, including the Student Protests in 1999, the Green Wave in 2009 and the Bloody November in 2019, have taken place within this time frame, resulting on the availability of multiple research possibilities 2) The chosen period is arguably the most productive period of the underground hip-hop scene in Iran, also referred to as the third and 'the contemporary' phase.¹²

Finally, I want to highlight that it is important to keep in mind that the government suppression within Iran does not allow 'critics' to express their concerns as openly as individuals abroad. It is for this very reason that I have chosen to write on this sensitive topic as my position outside of Iran allows me to conduct research without any limitations. I also

¹² Elham Golpushnezhad. "Untold Stories of DIY/Underground Iranian Rap Culture: The Legitimization of Iranian Hip-Hop and the Loss of Radical Potential." *Cultural Sociology* 12, no. 2 (2018): P. 271

believe that my direct links with artists and activists in Iran has resulted in a closer understanding of this topic.

Literature Review

As discussed in the introduction, I argue that the Iranian underground hip-hop scene is an important participator of the broader resistance networks which are visible and active within Iran. I build upon this argument by stating that the content created by the Iranian underground hip-hop scene has led to the coming to existence of a new method of resistance within Iran that has resulted in shaping a collective memory about the Iranian resistance scene through rap.

What is meant by the underground scene within this research is the practice of creating music without obtaining a government license. In order to be able to officially publish artistic creations in Iran, a request has to be submitted to ‘the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.’ This licensing procedure often restricts artists from producing work ‘legally’ as it is impossible to receive permission to publish songs that are slightly critical or outside the censorship boundaries of the regime.¹³ This has led to the creation of an active underground scene which the hip-hop culture is a part of.

The literature in this chapter is arranged in a thematic order, divided in sub-headings to clarify the different themes. This chapter will analyze a select number of literature available on earlier Iranian resistance movements and the concepts of human rights and freedom of expression. Next, available literature on the role of youth within dissident movements will be studied by analyzing the concepts of non-violent resistance and non-movements. Further, research conducted on hip-hop’s relation to resistance in Iran and the Iranian underground hip-hop scene and its originality will be analyzed.

¹³ Massimo Leone. “My Schoolmate: Protest Music in Present-Day Iran.” *Critical Discourse Studies* 9, no. 4 (2012) P. 352.

Resistance

A brief look at the global history of the previous century showcases a multitude of cases portraying the complicated dynamics between power and resistance. Across the world, a large number of revolts and revolutions have taken place, often including violent forms of revolt with the usage of arms. As Erica Chenoweth describes: “armed struggle used to be the primary way in which movements fought for change from outside the political system.”¹⁴ It was through these methods that individuals or a particular group within a society would showcase its dissatisfaction with the system.¹⁵ The Iranian 1979 revolution is an example that made use of armed movements which eventually led to a regime overthrow in Iran. What started as a slow build-up of ideological opposition movements, eventually triggered the creation of different political groups such as the Fadaeian-e-Khalgh, the Mojahedin-e-Khalgh, the Islamists and multiple other critics. In order to achieve their ideals, many of these individuals and groups engaged in armed conflict to fight the suppression that was enforced by the Shah’s regime and its state apparatus.

Fast forward, today, the Islamic Government of Iran exists for more than four decades and although, resistance methods have changed compared to decades ago, such movements continue to play a pivotal role within Iranian society. According to Chenoweth: “Non-violent resistance is a method of struggle in which unarmed people confront an adversary by using collective action including protests, demonstrations, strikes, and non-cooperation to build power and achieve political goals.”¹⁶ This process of building power to achieve political goals through methods of non-cooperation and demonstrations has replaced armed struggle and is retraceable in the contemporary dissident movements that took shape within the past few decades in Iran.

The following figure (Figure 1: Resistance movements in Iran between 1999 and 2019) is a portrayal of three major civil movements that took place in Iran between the years of 1999 and 2019. The aim of this diagram is to clarify the motives behind the civil movements in Iran, the methods of resistance used and the results of the uprisings.

¹⁴ Erica Chenoweth "The Future of Nonviolent Resistance." *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (2020) P. 70

¹⁵ Ibid. P.70

¹⁶ Ibid P. 70

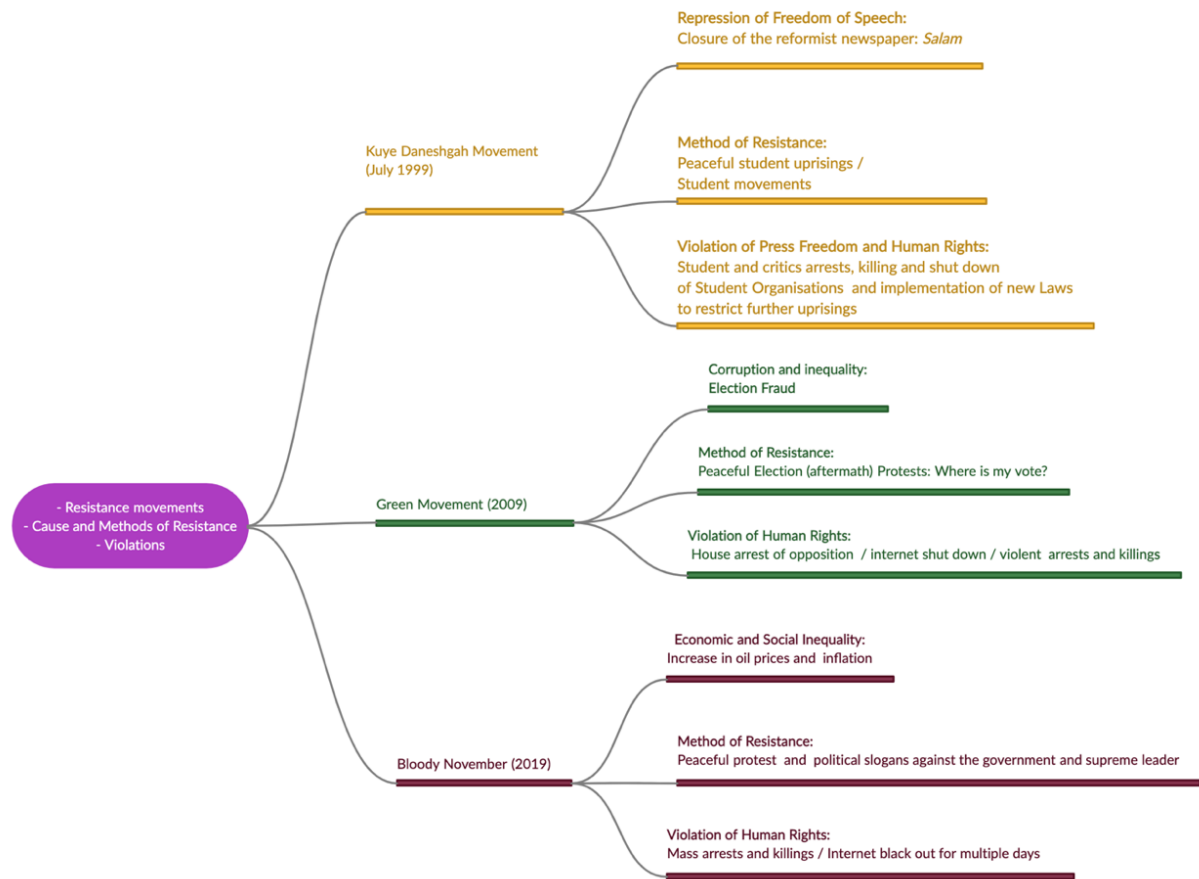


Figure 1: Resistance movements in Iran between 1999 and 2019

After the Iranian 1979 revolution, the social, economic and political situation in Iran has arguably not been at its most stable. These factors have resulted in an increased number of resistance movements that were repeatedly violently suppressed by the regime. It can be argued that the trigger behind the three above portrayed uprisings is foremost the violation of basic human rights and an increase of socio-economic inequalities.

A particular set of events fresh to memory are the Bloody November protests in 2019. It all started as a small protest against the increase of at least fifty percent in gasoline prices overnight but eventually spilled into a mass protest throughout different cities in the country.¹⁷ Some argue that it has been the biggest public unrest since the Iranian Revolution in 1979.

¹⁷ Farnaz Fassihi and Rick Gladstone, "With Brutal Crackdown, Iran Is Convulsed by Worst Unrest in 40 Years," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, December 1, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/01/world/middleeast/iran-protests-deaths.html>.

As Hafner-Burton argues: “human rights norms are among the most legitimate standards in the world, subscribing to them has great legitimating value for nation-states.”¹⁸ It is thus understandable that violating these basic rights and freedoms can lead to public unrest, civil uprisings and in some cases to wide-ranging resistance movements.

Resistance Language

The upcoming chapters of this thesis will focus on the engagement of the Iranian underground hip-hop scene with the already existing resistance movements. As referred to in the introduction, poetry has always played an important role within the Iranian culture. When analysing the discourses of the movements, this art form is visible within the protest methods of ordinary individuals but also in the methods of the Iranian underground hip-hop scene.

Massimo Leone’s article examines the role of music and poetry within the Iranian Green Movement protests of 2009. According to Leone and the available footage circulating on the internet, protesters engaged in forms of chanting, singing and using slogans at the protests and during the darkness of the night from their rooftops and balconies to remain unrecognized.¹⁹ Leone describes the story behind protesters engaging in the rooftop chants as follows: “nocturnal slogans/chants of protests come from an invisible source, protected by both the darkness of night and the position of the ‘performers’: thus, also those who, for various reasons, are unable to join the protests in a visible way.”²⁰ Phrases such as ‘Death to the Dictator’ and ‘Allahu Akbar’ are visible in the video footages and multiple articles have been written on the usage of these kind phrases within the Iranian dissident movements. Leone claims that the usage of the phrase ‘Allahu Akbar’ should be considered outside of religious meanings, stating: “many of those who shout ‘Allahu Akhbar’ in night time from the windows/balconies/rooftops of contemporary Iranian cities do so in order to use these words as a sort of encrypted message of protest, whose decrypted content is: I protest.”²¹

¹⁸ Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, Kiyoteru Tsutsui, and John W. Meyer, “International Human Rights Law and the Politics of Legitimation,” *International Sociology* 23, no. 1 (2008): P. 121.

¹⁹ *Rooftop Chantings Iran 2009* (YouTube, 2009), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxR9Vt41yyM&ab_channel=SamSh.

²⁰ Massimo Leone. “My Schoolmate: Protest Music in Present-Day Iran.” *Critical Discourse Studies* 9, no. 4 (2012) P. 350.

²¹ Massimo Leone. “My Schoolmate: Protest Music in Present-Day Iran.” *Critical Discourse Studies* 9, no. 4 (2012) P. 352.

Another method used during protests are songs that have a revolutionary character. Leone's article: 'My schoolmate: protest music in present-day Iran' is mainly focused around the song: 'Yare Dabestaniye Man' which is a direct translation of: 'My School Mate.' The article discusses the reuse of songs that have socio-political meanings during different movements at different times to voice their protests.²²

Saeed Ghaseminejad's article 'Evolution Towards Revolution: The Development of Street Protests in the Islamic Republic of Iran' studies the patterns of protests in the previous decades and analyzes the hidden discourses in the movements. According to Ghaseminejad, anti-government chants and slogans are often the main ingredients of dissident movements but what differentiates the messages in these uprisings in Iran are the increasing criticism and rejection of the regime that have a nationalistic undertone, transgressing previous taboos.²³

These slogans used during protests have led to an extremely repressive environment, resulting in a shift from slogans that were merely contesting issues such as a stolen presidential election "Where is my vote?" to chants targeting the supreme leader, such as "Death to the Dictator" and "Reza Shah Rest in Peace," in other words, from state reform to revolution against the entire system²⁴ These protest languages were unimaginable a decade ago, but by studying the footages from recent movements and the literature, it becomes evident that protest language in Iran have changed tremendously and in this changing landscape, new method of resistance participate with these movements from their own sphere of influence.

These findings showcase similarities to what will be studied in the upcoming chapters on the Iranian underground hip-hop scene. I argue that although protest songs have always been used in earlier protest spheres, the songs have always used an indirect hidden method to express the protests, whereas hip-hop engages with the method of manifest content and is addressing protest in a direct way. This directness is arguably the unique character of this scene, allowing it to create new knowledge that otherwise would remain unexpressed. The language used by these artists is a great example of how the Iranian protest language has evolved and showcases its ability to preserve collective memories related to the resistance events.

The past decades have shown that in fear of political engagement, many activists are forced to conceal their activities or flee the country, as the system restricts the freedom of these individuals or groups. This is a known phenomenon under authoritarian regimes which has also

²² Massimo Leone. "My Schoolmate: Protest Music in Present-Day Iran." *Critical Discourse Studies* 9, no. 4 (2012)P. 356.

²³ Saeed Ghaseminejad. "EVOLUTION TOWARD REVOLUTION." *Journal of International Affairs (New York)* 73, no. 2 (2020): P. 149

²⁴ Ibid. P.150.

been highlighted by Pascal Menoret and Marie Duboc and can also be connected to the hidden methods of resistance discussed earlier on. Menoret and Duboc speak of ‘informal activism’ when discussing forms of activism that are shaped by concealing activities.²⁵ Paola Rivetti engages with the concept of ‘informal activism; as introduced by Menoret and Duboc by explaining the activism landscape that took shape in Iran after the 1979 revolution in her article.²⁶

According to Rivetti the green movement benefitted from the already existing informal activist networks that had come to existence in the previous years. These sub-groups focused on campaigns related to issues, such as women’s rights, ethnic diversity discussions and students’ rights. During the Green Movement in 2009, some of these groups joined the Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karoubi’s electoral committees.²⁷ But the aftermath of the election proved that the Green Movement was way bigger than only an electoral campaign. Rivetti quotes: “the movement’s demands went beyond the support for Mousavi and Karoubi, and was unable to “capture the state,” substantiating its demands into policies. It remained dramatically exposed to repression. In such circumstances, “going underground” represented the only option for activists who wished to remain active.”²⁸ What is important to note is that ‘informal activism’ does not directly result in complete silencing and inactivity of the activists. It can even be argued that by suppressing the rights of these individuals and their networks, new methods and groups of resistance were shaped.

Regardless of the growing civil movements and the exposure of the violence’s used by the regime, oppression and silencing of critics continues to grow. Important human rights activist like Nasrin Sotoodeh and Narges Mohammadi have been imprisoned and unlawfully deprived of their basic human rights and freedoms.²⁹ The families of the individuals who were killed during the protests are often denied the simple right of commemoration of their lost ones and face threats to remain silent.³⁰ These are only a few examples within a greater picture of

²⁵ Pascal Menoret. “Leaving Islamic Activism Behind.” In *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, 68–85. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804788038-006>.

²⁶ Paola Rivetti. “Political Activism in Iran: Strategies for Survival, Possibilities for Resistance and Authoritarianism.” *Democratization* 24, no. 6 (2017): P. 1184..

²⁷ Ibid. P. 1184

²⁸ Ibid. P. 1184.

²⁹ “Iran: Jailed for Defending Women Who Opposed Compulsory Veiling, Nasrin Sotoudeh Must Be Freed, Say UN Experts,” OHCHR, accessed November 17, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27179&LangID=E>.

³⁰ Michael Lipin and Ramin Haghjoo, “Families of Iran's Slain November 2019 Protesters Say Pursuit of Justice Thwarted by Govt's Broken Promises,” VOA (Families of Iran's Slain November 2019 Protesters Say Pursuit of Justice Thwarted by Govt's Broken Promises, November 16, 2020), https://www.voanews.com/a/middle-east_voa-news-iran_families-irans-slain-november-2019-protesters-say-pursuit-justice/6198423.html.

oppression used by the regime to maintain in power. Artists within the Iranian underground hip-hop scene have experienced similar levels of oppression, forcing them to work from the realms of the underground as ‘informal activists.’

Youth and Resistance

In order to understand the Iranian underground hip-hop scene, it is crucial to understand the youth that shape this scene from within. Seventy percent of Iran’s population are under the age of thirty, as a result of the baby boom after the Iran-Iraq war era.³¹ Jared Cohen explains the youth’s position as a majority as follows: “In the absence of a strong opposition, young Iranians are now the de facto opposition in the Islamic Republic.”³²

Asef Bayat’s book pays a great amount of attention to the concept of youth. Bayat follows a decentralized and flexible view on resistance movements, which he refers to as social ‘non-movements.’ According to Bayat: “non-movements refer to the collective actions of noncollective actors; they 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.”³³

Bayat argues that change is not only created through revolutions and demonstrations but is established and shaped within circles of individuals such as the youth. In our case, this can be connected to the activities of the Iranian underground hip-hop scene. Bayat’s acknowledgment of non-movements and the groups involved in these movements is crucial for our case study but it should be taken in consideration that the author’s concept does not fully touch upon the determined character of the Iranian underground hip-hop scene.

In our case study it is evident that the work of these rappers is created with a strong ideological desire to voice socio-political changes. What I argue is that although Bayat manages to recognize and acknowledge the existence of these networks, his description of the non-movement’s non-ideological participation does not fully match the characteristics of the Iranian underground hip-hop scene.

By describing the youth non-movements, Bayat speaks of ‘passive networks’ which according to him are networks where collective identities take shape by engaging with one and other in spaces such as cafés, schools or digital platforms. In his further description of ‘passive

³¹ Jared Cohen. "Iran's Young Opposition: Youth in Post-Revolutionary Iran." *The SAIS Review of International Affairs* 26, no. 2 (2006): P. 3.

³² Ibid. P.3.

³³ Asef Bayat. *Life as Politics : How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Second ed. (2013). P.15.

networks' he argues that it is important that these youth networks pay attention to democratic change and engage in political thinking if they want to lead to political changes.³⁴ The findings in this thesis showcase that contrary to Bayat's view, youth networks, and in this particular case, the Iranian underground hip-hop scene, is actively engaged with political subjects and challenges the existing doctrines visible in the Iranian political structure. The ideological fight for change within this scene should be taken in serious consideration. This scene's artistic method of creating resistance is far from passivity and political ignorance as they have succeeded in creating collective memories about the movements through their artistic work.

The main element that differentiates this group from other groups who are involved in the resistance movements is the uncensored language used by this group and explicitly their creations that cross all the boundaries imposed by the regime to restrict their expression rights. The connection of the songs with the actual movements that have taken place in Iran, shape a new level of understanding about the Iranian resistance scene. The rap tracks can arguably be seen as narration of resistance stories. Hip-hop has therefore become a weapon in the hands of the artists for its ability to remain untouched, resulting in the preservation of collective memories.

Youth and Hip-Hop.

Hip-Hop is one of these social networks used by the youth to bring political discontent to discussion and when necessary, participate in resistance movements through their own networks. According to Nasrin Alavi, resistance movements in Iran are often organized by the younger generation and are vibrant and alive.³⁵ Alavi's book analyses the writings of Iran's younger generation posted on online-blogs and acknowledges this generation's efforts to address the injustice taking place in the country by engaging with contemporary methods of resistance such as online publications of songs and blogs.

Some argue that hip-hop was and, in some cases, still is entangled with violence and gang culture and conflicts with the idea of non-violent resistance methods. Yet, this artistic resistance method has from beginning on engaged itself with peaceful political discourse that have

³⁴ Asef Bayat. *Life as Politics : How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Second ed. (2013).P.15.

³⁵ Nasrin Alavi, *We Are Iran* (London: Portobello Books, 2005). P. 147

managed to spread globally throughout the past decades.³⁶ As Martin Lamotte argues “Hip-hop can be seen as an unconventional form of activism and must therefore also be analysed as a political and social movement.”³⁷ As I have argued earlier on, it is crucial to acknowledge the existence of micropolitical activities, which in our case would be the hip-hop scene’s activities within the existing political movements.

By using hip-hop as a method, the youth in Iran have been able to shape a novel method of protests to express their concerns regarding the socio-political inequalities within the country. By using rap, they address their day-to-day problems and combine this with traditional art forms such as Persian Poetry to integrate this art style with their traditions. The ability of this scene to continue working from anywhere and its underground character has made it difficult to suppress and has resulted in its flourishing. More on this will become clearer once we study the actual lyrics in the upcoming content analysis sections.

Unfortunately, what has been understood of hip-hop and written so far about the Iranian underground hip-hop scene is either generalized, misinterpreted or not dealt with at an in-depth level which showcases the lack of knowledge about this scene and the unfortunate little attention that the scene has received so far. Sholeh Johnston’s article “Persian Rap: The Voice of Modern Iran’s Youth” is a clear example of this existing gap. The article compares dissimilar rappers from different subgenres. Although the article recognizes the existence of this underground genre and their activities but the comparisons made within the article are subject to discussion and in some cases even invalid.

The rappers which are compared in Johnston’s article to one and other, such as Felakat and Hichkas completely differ in style, message and socio-political position.³⁸ This comparison is worrisome as it demonstrates the author’s lack of knowledge about the Persian underground hip-hop scene. These generalizations and lack of understanding of the scene and its subgenres are often reoccurring in the work of multiple other authors who have written about this subject so far. This lack of knowledge can be blamed on the fact that Johnston’s article was written in 2008, when the Iranian hip-hop scene was new and lesser evolved than it is today.

On the other hand, there are certain authors who demonstrate a basic understanding about the different types of rap groups and genres, but have not dedicated enough attention to the subgenres at an in-depth level. Elham Golpushnezhad’s article about the legitimization of

³⁶ Martin Lamotte. "Rebels Without a Pause: Hip-hop and Resistance in the City." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38, no. 2 (2014): P. 686

³⁷ Ibid. P.686

³⁸ Sholeh Johnston. "Persian Rap: The Voice of Modern Iran's Youth." *Journal of Persianate Studies*, no. 1 (2008)

Iranian Hip-Hop is one of the examples when it comes to generalization and shallow description of the rappers. Golpushnezhad recognizes the existence of subgenres within the underground scene but her scope of analyses and arguably, her position within Iran does not allow her to discuss this subject in a broader context. One interesting point that Golpushnezhad recognizes is the difference between political rappers and party rappers. She quotes the following: “given the different kinds of hip-hop developments evident in Iran, the culture was divided into two groups, comprising those rappers struggling to establish a political identity articulated through resistance against the dominant Islamic authority and those who focused on producing music to be performed at parties.”³⁹ Yet, her claim about the division of the underground scene into two groups is debatable and not fully supported, demonstrating as mentioned earlier a lack of understanding of the complexity of the subject.

What is important to note is that there is a difference of ten years between the work of Johnston and Golpushnezhad. Johnston’s article stems from 2008 when the hip-hop scene was new and flourishing whereas Golpushnezhad’s article is from 2018. Both authors have discussed the underground music but the time difference showcases how the underground hip-hop scene has evolved throughout the years. Johnston’s article is completely unrelated to the hip-hop scene we are familiar with nowadays. Golpushnezhad’s research is more complex and overarching the contemporary rap scene. Unfortunately, both articles lack the level of complexity when it comes to interpreting the content produced by the Iranian underground hip-hop artists. The analysis of both authors does not touch upon the scene’s resisting character and its role and participation within civil movements.

When it comes to the underground hip-hop scene within Iran, a clear gap in the literature is recognized. Not much has been written on the Iranian underground hip-hop scene’s unique character, and what has been written so far does not discuss the subject at an in-depth level. The existing literature does not succeed to touch upon the underground hip-hop scene and its direct link to resistance movements. The youth movements have not been dealt with in detail and a study on the creation of their own networks has been left out. It is exactly this gap in the literature that has triggered my interest to research this topic at in-depth level. The period that has been chosen for this study, from 1999 to 2019 has seen the greatest grow and changes within the underground hip-hop scene. Yet, little attention has been given to this specific group and scene.

³⁹ Elham Golpushnezhad. "Untold Stories of DIY/Underground Iranian Rap Culture: The Legitimization of Iranian Hip-Hop and the Loss of Radical Potential." *Cultural Sociology* 12, no. 2 (2018): P. 267

I argue that the changing socio-political factors within Iran and an increased frequency in civilian movements have affected and changed the characteristics of the Iranian underground hip-hop scene. These changes have led to the creation of a genre within the hip-hop scene that mainly focuses on the creation socio-political raps and uses protest language to express its motives. Through these raps, new languages are created which have resulted in the spread of new knowledge about the events taking place within Iran and have led to the creations of unerasable collective memories through hip-hop. The content analysis in the following chapters will aim to clarify how the Iranian underground hip-hop scene is creating new knowledge about the resistance scene in Iran.

Methodology

The main objective of this thesis is to showcase the method of resistance used by the Iranian underground hip-hop scene and its role within the socio-political movements taking place in Iran and to answer the research question: “How does the Iranian Hip-hop scene distinguish its method of resistance from the already existing resistance movements within Iran?” I argue that this youth movement has not been a subject of detailed research which has caused their method of resistance to remain partially undiscovered up until today.

The upcoming chapters will argue that the rap scene in Iran is an extension of the movements that have taken place in Iran but what differentiates this scene is its ability to remain active and relevant, even at times when there are no socio-political movements taking place in Iran. Through these artistic creations, this scene has shaped a collective memory that is unerasable and remains relevant for our understanding about the socio-political movements in Iran.

This thesis uses a conceptual content analysis focusing on the themes of resistance and youth. Conceptual content analysis tends to focus on the occurrence of a selected term either in an implicit or explicit manner. As argued by Zhang & Wildemuth, content analysis is “a process designed to condense raw data into categories or themes based on valid inference and interpretation.”⁴⁰ It is exactly this categorization by themes that will be used throughout this thesis to showcase the messages within the examined rap songs. This categorization has also

⁴⁰ Yan Zhang & Barbara Wildemuth. *Qualitative analysis of content Applications of Social Research Methods to Questions in Information and Library Science*. (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2009) P. 1

been followed in the literature review section and will continue as the main structure throughout this research.

The process of understanding the connection between the Iranian underground hip-hop scene and their involvement within the earlier discussed resistance movement, analyzing previously published interviews on the Iranian underground hip-hop scene and interpreting music recordings created by these artists act as the main sources for this study.

The primary data used in the content analysis are the rap tracks created by the artists that will be analyzed in the upcoming chapters. Alongside the rap songs, academic literature, data from interviews and articles related to these artists will act as secondary sources. Primary sources are defined as “research that produces data that are only obtainable directly from an original source.”⁴¹ Which in this case are the rap songs.

Another important distinction within the method of content analysis is the notion of manifest content and latent content. This is particularly important for this research as the songs that will be analysed make use of this method in the message they convey. To elaborate on this, Berg explains the definition of a manifest content as content that relates to those elements that are physically present and countable, which means that it is possible to observe this content through listening, hearing or reading.⁴² Whereas latent content is characterized by interpretive reading of the symbolic and underlying physical data.⁴³ This usage of symbolism is a key factor while exploring the lyrics of the rappers. The rappers make use of both methods to convey their messages but it is crucial to pay extra attention to latent content as it is a deliberate method used by the rappers to surpass boundaries.

The usage of this method is mainly connected to the censorship policies within Iran, which has created a restricted environment for artists to express their thoughts in openness, at the same time, latent content is often used in classical Persian poetry of which the Iranian underground hip-hop scene is a contemporary division.

A key feature of conducting content analysis is to create a categorization classification in which the content analysis can be conducted. The content analysis aims to identify the intentions and focus of the Iranian underground hip-hop scene. The process of categorization creates a clear overview of the content that will be analyzed and separates it in smaller steps. In our case, the upcoming chapters, as mentioned earlier will be divided in two parts which have been chosen based

⁴¹ Donald Currie, *Developing and Applying Study Skills: Writing Assignments, Dissertations and Management Reports* (London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2005). P. 89.

⁴² John D. Hillebrand & Bruce L Berg, “Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences.” *Teaching Sociology*. (Beverly Hills: American Sociological Association, 2000.) P. 243.

⁴³ Ibid. P. 269.

on two themes: Resistance and Youth. Each chapter will focus on these themes and the references made to these themes in the lyrics of the rappers.

The first focus theme, 'Resistance' will be analyzed through dissecting the lyrics and recognizing sections related to the concept of resistance. This section will look at how the rappers refer to this theme in their songs and their usage of the earlier mentioned manifest and latent content. Further on, the consistency of this theme within the rap songs and their connection with the socio-political issues and reoccurring themes in the earlier discussed movements such as freedom of speech and individual rights to which they refer to in their songs will be analyzed.

Next, the concept of 'youth' will serve as our main analysis and will focus into the usage of the youth concept within the lyrics of the rappers. This chapter will aim to highlight how the rappers portray their generation and how they engage with this group to involve them in the socio-political messages that their songs are bearing. The content analysis on youth will thus focus on the lyrics that specifically addresses the youth and the issues related to their generation.

The limitations of this study are mainly related to the little research that has been conducted on the Iranian underground hip-hop scene and its unacknowledged status. Although hip-hop in general has been studied globally to a great extent, the Iranian hip-hop scene remains partially undiscovered and often underestimated. Conducting this research is not accessible to everyone, as close connections with artists are necessary to understand and research this topic carefully. It is also difficult to understand the rap lyrics for individuals who have little knowledge about the Iranian underground hip-hop scene.

The upcoming chapters will build upon my argument that this scene's music has led to the creation of a collective memory about the events that have taken place within Iran in the past decades. These creations are arguably an evolved resistance method of the movements that have already taken place.

What differentiates this genre with other resistance activities is that the creations of this scene continue to circulate and play a crucial role in our understandings about the socio-political events taking place in Iran. The tracks created by these artists result in a previously unknown deeper understanding of the events, something that can only be felt and understood through artistic expression. Contrary to the temporary character of on-the-ground resistance movements, such as protest marches, artistic creations of this scene are everlasting and will continue to influence the understanding of the listeners as it is hard to limit these creations.

This scene's non-dismissible character has led to its growth, as it is able to surpass borders and censorship limitations, proving it to be hard to suppress.

Hip-Hop in Resistance

The Iranian underground hip-hop scene is a clear product of the societal problems taking place within Iran. This chapter aims to clarify the resistance language used by the Iranian hip-hop scene and its similarities or differences with the bigger resistance movements that have taken place in Iran.

This chapter will argue that the Iranian underground hip-hop scene, also referred to as Rap-e Farsi by Iranians, has experienced a tremendous growth throughout the past decade, increasing its pivotal role within the resistance scene of Iran, especially amongst the younger population. The recorded songs by individuals from within this scene are often extremely political and address sensitive topics that cross the red lines of the regime. Rappers who are actively engaged in this specific politicalized genre risk their lives by creating such content. Their activities have been problematized by the regime as Rap-e Farsi has been condemned and labelled as illegal. Through their recordings, they create a new set of knowledge about existing dissident movements in Iran and shape a collective memory that is non-suppressible by the regime.

The Iranian underground hip-hop scene has lived through a range of oppressions. Rappers including Ho3ein Eblis, Soroush Hichkas, Reza Pishro, Ali Quf, Bahram Nouraei, and multiple others have previously been interrogated and some even imprisoned for a period of time.⁴⁴ Other rappers such as Shahin Najafi and Ashkan Fadaei have been labelled as state traitors and apostates. In 2012, a fatwa was issued against Shahin Najafi, resulting in death threats and eventually forcing Najafi to go into hiding in Germany.⁴⁵ The strict measurements of the regime have forced most of these artists to leave Iran and continue their activity from abroad as their ability to produce work from within has become burdensome. Due to the online character of this scene, it is somehow irrelevant where the artists reside as they are able to share their productions with their audiences from anywhere. It is worth noting that some artists have

⁴⁴ Reza Sayah, "Young Rappers Arrested in Iran," CNN (Cable News Network, November 7, 2010), <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/meast/11/07/iran.rap.arrests/index.html>.

⁴⁵ "Iranian Rapper Faces Death Threats and Fatwa for 'Blasphemous' Song," The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, May 14, 2012), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/may/14/iranian-rapper-death-threat-fatwa>.

deliberately chosen to continue working from within the country and are unable or refuse to leave, examples are Omid Safir, Bamdad and Ali Sorena.

It can be argued that rap music in general is a genre that is entangled with surveillance and resistance.⁴⁶ This claim is at least valid for the sub-genre within the hip-hop culture that is producing work directly linked to socio-political themes. Hip-hop artists like Ali Sorena refer to this genre as 'alternative hip-hop' due to its socio-politically loaded expression method.⁴⁷ The hip-hop genre in general has seen tremendous changes from its inception and has evolved in a multitude of sub-branches. According to Nelson: "rap music has always been engaged in a struggle for public space amidst a complex web of institutional policing. The entire hip hop movement is rooted in the struggle for public space, of claiming the streets with physical presence."⁴⁸

It is exactly this engagement with the public space and desire of physical presence that connects the Iranian underground hip-hop scene with the society and the existing resistance movements. In a society where expression rights and other forms of basic freedoms have been harshly suppressed, the survival of a scene which engages with politicalized topics is unique and worthy of attention. According to Martin Lamotte: "hip-hop is rooted in an ambiguity between its inherent secrecy as a hidden transcript, and the task of becoming public in order to reach a larger audience and express emotions to others."⁴⁹ Through hip-hop, rappers are able to speak out about their discontent and frustrations in a direct and uncovered manner, which otherwise would maintain impossible.

Members of the Iranian underground hip-hop scene mix elements from traditional Persian poetry with contemporary techniques of hip-hop. By using metaphors and traditional storytelling techniques, the rappers are able to address their concerns in an artistic way that is very Iranian, contrary to the popular believe, portraying Rap as a Western import method. The usage of metaphors in the lyrics leaves room for open interpretations allowing the rappers to be more critical. This method will also be analyzed throughout this chapter by focusing on the methods of manifest content and latent content which was explained in the methodology chapter.

⁴⁶ Erik Nielson. "Can't C Me": Surveillance and Rap Music." *Journal of Black Studies* 40, no. 6 (2010): P.1254

⁴⁷ Ali Sorena., *Street and Art / هنر و خیابان*, January 5, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fy9-jYPpJN8&ab_channel=PersianRAP. 00:06:35

⁴⁸ Erik Nielson. "Can't C Me": Surveillance and Rap Music." *Journal of Black Studies* 40, no. 6 (2010): P. 1256.

⁴⁹ Martin Lamotte. "Rebels Without a Pause: Hip-hop and Resistance in the City." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38, no. 2 (2014): P. 690.

I argue that there is an abundance of rap tracks that address socio-political issues in a very direct manner, building upon our understanding of the socio-political issues in Iran. A few examples are Sorena's 'Khake Sorkh,' Hichkas' 'Dastasho Mosht Karde' and Bahram's 'Inja Irane.' These are only a few amidst many songs that approach an open and direct dialogue with government officials, by calling out the state and the police. This type of criticism is hard to imagine in any other sphere of protest as it would result in silencing the critic immediately.

This chapter will analyze six songs that are directly engaging with the theme of resistance and individual freedoms. The first song that will be analyzed is Ali Sorena's 'Nemitarsam.' The title of the song translates as 'I am not Scared' and is filled with metaphors that are at first difficult to decode. By analyzing the lyrics, it soon becomes evident that the rapper is making use of latent content to express his thoughts.

It is at first hard to understand the dialogue that Sorena has with an imaginary individual or thing, which is according to the rapper influencing his life. As the song continues, it becomes clear that the rapper's subject in the song is an imaginary depiction of his homeland, Iran. Sorena is sketching indirectly, a depiction of the country without naming it or using direct references. He engages in a conversation with his subject as if it is an alive being. In one of the verses, he speaks to his subject with: 'I am not Scared of Your Future' and whatever it is you have planned for me and my future. The song refers to the act of resistance and speaking out about how bloodshed and protest have played an important role in the history of the country and how it has affected the lives of the citizens. Below are a few verses of the song 'Nemitarsam.'⁵⁰

خیلیا رو تنمون ریختن خون، تووی خون میمونیم

Many shed blood on our body, we remain swimming in blood

بگو به اون که بالا نشست ، روی تنت اون که صاحبت

Tell the one that is sitting on top of you, the one that is controlling you

بهبش بگو من دیگه آماده ام ، وقتش رسیده که آماده شه

Tell him, I am ready now, the time has come, tell them to get ready for me

⁵⁰ Ali Sorena "Nemitarsam" February 14, 2014.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zAxM5Bx4lnU&t=9s&ab_channel=VafaPk

In this section of Sorena's song, the rapper is speaking about the violent history of the country and the killings that have taken place in the previous years. By using latent content, the song at first sounds like an internal battle of the rapper with himself or another individual. But as one analyses the lyrics, it becomes clear that the rapper speaks from his personal view and is calling for resistance as he is telling the subject, in this case, the system ruling the country, to get ready for his attack through his raps. The last two verses of the song, beneath this paragraph are describing the rapper's constant struggle in convincing himself to fight for the country and to resist the bitterness of the dark days that the country is facing. Sorena is referring to the individuals that are fleeing the country because they no longer can endure the worsening situation. The song finishes with the statement that the rapper is going to stay, no matter how difficult life will get. The emphasis of the rapper on resistance and fighting to change the future of the country showcases its direct link with the events taking place in the country.

شاید موند شاید رفت ، شاید به تلخی عادت کرد

Maybe they remained, maybe the left, maybe they got used to this bitterness

من روی خاکت زدم ، نمیترم از آیندت

But I will stay, I will remain on your soil, I am not scared of your future

The 2010 published song by Hichkas 'Ye Rooze Khoob Miyad' is the artist's ode to events that took place during the Green Movement in 2009. Hichkas has narrated a story line that is the opposite of the events that took place during the dissident movement in 2009. The song is engaging in a hopeful narration of the Iranian future.⁵¹ In this conversation with its audience, Hichkas is sketching a scenario of peaceful days, without signs of bloodshed and mass murder. The artist uses latent content to sketch the situation. 'Ye Rooze Khoob Miyad' condemns any form of violence. In one of the verses, he says: "If I would be gone in the future, I want you to promise me that you will give a flower to every soldier you will see." This highlights the artist's approach towards a peaceful future which he envisions for the country.

'Ye Rooze Khoob Miyad' is an unquestionable proof of the rapper's political engagement with the socio-political issues that took shape in 2009 but is also a portrayal of how the Iranian underground hip-hop scene changes the paradigm of resistance by engaging in discussions

⁵¹ Hichkas. "Ye Rooze Khoob Miad," March 14, 2010.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQj_B9TkEBc&ab_channel=ma01404.

about future and hope through their art. ‘Ye Rooze Khoob Miyad’ is in fact a reaction to the horrific events that took place during the Green Movement protests in Iran but by changing the narrative and creating a story line, the song has succeeded in becoming a symbol of hope for those who are still awaiting a brighter future.

This change in paradigm and call for peace is pivotal to acknowledge as the main audience of this scene consists of young people who play an important role in reshaping the future of the country. Peaceful calls towards change influences their understanding about resistance. It is through the openness of these songs that they receive a different understanding of the events that have taken place in Iran. These songs are a collection of collective memories that will forever be part of the resistance movements that took place in Iran. Beneath is a section of the lyrics ‘Ye Rooze Khoob Miyad.’

یه روز خوب میاد که ما همو نکشیم / به هم نگاه بد نکنیم

A good day will arrive, a day in which we won't kill one and other and won't look badly at each other

هیچ کدوممون هم نیستیم بیکار / در حال ساخت و ساز ایران

None of us will be left without a role in the rebuild and development of Iran

بعد این همه بارون خون / بالاخره پیداش می شه رنگین کمون

After all the raining blood, a rainbow will eventually reappear

دیگه از سنگ ابر نمی شه آسمون / به سرخی لاله نمی شه آب جوب

The clouds in the sky will no longer be made up of rocks, the street canals will no longer be turned red like tulips

اگه نبودم می خوام یه قول بدی بهم / که هر سربازی دیدی گل بدی بهش

If I would be gone, I want you to promise me that you will give a flower to every soldier you will see

دیگه هیچ مرغی پشت میله نیست / هیچ زن آزاده ای بیوه نیست

Birds will no longer be trapped behind bars, and no freedom seeking woman will be widowed.

Hichkas' usage of symbolism through latent content, is to reshape our understating of concepts such as resistance and freedom by comparing these concepts to freeing of birds from cages, flowers and thorns in order to sketch an image of hope and peace in the imagination of its listeners while also engaging with aspects used in traditional Persian poetry, such as the Bustan which was quoted in the introduction.

The emphasis of the song ‘Ye Rooze Khoob Miyad’ is on promoting non-violent methods of resistance as the rapper approaches all the injustices that are retraceable within the previous

resistance movements in Iran from a narrative that promotes hope and peace. This is visible in the lyrics as the rapper calls for a peaceful rebuild of the country and the spread of freedoms rather than revenge and violent counter attacks. The title and the chorus of the songs which is repeating ‘Ye rooze Khoob Miyad’ translating as ‘a good day will arrive’ is the prove of the rapper’s optimistic vision for the future. Hichkas is using an imaginary future as the entry point for his song by not mentioning today but rather a visionary tomorrow, filled with peace and hope.

Hichkas’ reference to the future is similar to the method used by Ali Sorena in the above translated track. It can be argued that both artists are speaking to their audiences about the future through the usage of latent content. They do so in order to encourage their listeners to remain hopeful about the changes that are still possible to take place within the country and to highlight the important role of every individual in shaping this imaginary ‘better future.’

When studying the more actual songs that were produced in the previous three years, it becomes evident that the hopeful approach used by the rappers previously, has shifted. In 2019, directly after the November uprisings in Iran, Hichkas published another song as a response to the resistance movement that took place within the country. Contrary to the peaceful approach of his previous songs, his new song: ‘Dastasho Mosht Karde’ translating as ‘He Has Made a Fist’ was a direct criticism of the regime and its repressive state apparatus.⁵² This time, instead of using latent content methods, the rapper uses manifest content to address his concerns. The song engages in a story telling method which calls for the creation of a unity in the population to voice the injustices taking place in Iran.

همه‌ی آرزوهاشو کشتن ولی جنازه‌ای تحویل نگرفته

They have killed all his dreams but they denied to give him a corpse

از تو سلول صدا ضجه میاد و

From within the cells, you can hear the cries

همه‌ی کشور رو قفس کشیدند و می‌گن اینجا هیشکی زندانی نی

They have encaged the whole country but they claim that there are no prisoners

این کوچه‌ها رو سال‌هاست با خون شستن ولی تعداد تلفات کمه مثکه

⁵² Hichkas. “Dastasho Mosht Karde ,” December 10, 2019.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=joEh2EQJeVQ&ab_channel=Moltafet. / Persian language does not use gender neutral. In this case ‘Dastasho Mosht Karde’ can be used for both genders and does not refer to a he or she. I have chosen to use ‘he’ just to make it easier for the reader.

It has become years that they are washing these streets with blood, but apparently it is still not enough

می‌گن حریم شخصی ولی گلوله میاد تو خونه و از شیشه رد می‌شه

They say private space, but a bullet burst through his house window

مملکتو به خون کشیدن و خبر کشته‌شده‌های یه جا دیگه پخش می‌شه

They have transformed the country to a blood bath but the news is only heard outside the country

خیلیا حبس شدن و مردن، این پایان نی، هنوز نرسیدیم ته قصه

Many have died, but this is not the end, we have not approached the finish line of the story

همه‌ی اعتراضا جرم

Here, all kind of objections are crimes

تو خیابون صدا شعار اومد و مردم شدن دشمن

From the streets you heard slogans, and people were suddenly perceived as the enemy

همه رو قتل عام می‌کنن پشت درهایی که قفل می‌مونن

They pledge genocide against all behind closed doors.

ما همه با هم هستیم

We are in this all together!

Dastasho Mosht Karde criticizes the mass killings and condemns the way the regime has deprived its citizens of their basic rights such as peaceful protests. The themes of non-violent resistance and freedom are once again reoccurring in the work of the artist. It can be argued that Hichkas' shift towards a more pessimistic writing style is relatable to the time frame in which the song was published. The Green Movement in 2009 was mainly perceived as a spark and an opportunity for change but eventually proved to be a false hope. In that time, songs were less direct which was a primary reason to make use of latent content. The previous years have showcased how difficult it is to create changes within the country. Although rappers continue to address the unjust system through their creations, their language has significantly changed and follows a less hopeful approach compared to years ago. By using manifest content, the rappers nowadays refer to actual events that have taken place and criticize the system with great openness, without any boundaries. This directness and ability to speak out about issues without any boundaries is arguably one of the main unique characteristics of the Iranian underground hip-hop scene that distinguishes this scene from other forms of resistance.

Another recent example of using manifest content is Ashkan Fadaei's song 'Az Karaj ta Langerud' translating as 'From Karaj to Langerud.'⁵³ The song starts with the voice of Mahbube Ramezani, the mother of the eighteen-year-old killed Pezhman Gholipour who was

⁵³ Fadaei "Az Karaj ta Langerud" August 21, 2021.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=joEh2EQJeVQ&ab_channel=Moltafet

shot death during the Bloody November Protests. Fadaei released a song in memory of Gholipour and criticizes the regime in the song. Fadaei's song came out after the movements and is engaging with information and events that even took place after the 2019 movements. It is thus evident that the Iranian hip-hop scene continues to create content even in times when there are no civil movements taking place in Iran or when no resistance is visible. This showcases the movements' ability to engage with every day actualities, arguably, more engaged than any other resistance methods within the country.

مقام معظم رهبری یالا بگو بچم کجاست؟

Highly respected Supreme Leader tell me where is my child?

ما هیچ وقت نمی‌شیم از هم جدا یالا بگو بچم کجاست؟

We will never be separated (with my child) so hurry up tell me where is my child?

ما هیچ وقت نمی‌شیم از هم جدا بگو قاتل بچم کجاست؟

We will never be separated (the people) so hurry up tell me where is the killer of my child?

آدم نکش، شلیک نمی‌شه این گلوله سر خود

Don't kill the people, this bullet won't fire by itself

مامن لباس سفیدت قرمز چر؟

Mom, why are your white clothes turned in red?

گورای گمنام و جونیای تیکه‌تیکه

Unnamed graves and bodies of the youth in pieces

مقام خزعبل رهبری یالا بگو بچم کجاست؟

Vulgar Supreme Leader, tell me where is my child?

It is worthy to acknowledge the direct language used by Fadaei towards Iran's highest political and religious leader, Ali Khamenei. Fadaei's referral to the killings of innocent individuals and his ability to verbally challenge those in power is a vivid portrayal of how the Iranian hip-hop scene is resisting the unjust system within Iran through explicit protest language.

The unique character of the Iranian underground hip-hop scene is its ability to address topics in a great detail which is impossible to do in other protest spheres such as marches. The scene's storytelling approach and arguably, fast method of production allows it to be up to date with all the actualities. Above we have looked at four songs addressing the protests, the following two songs are a criticism of media freedom and police violence (outside of the protests.)

Omid Safir's song 'Rooznameh Sobh' translating as 'The Morning Newspaper' is a critical approach of the rapper towards the state-controlled media outlets such as newspapers. Safir uses a mixture of manifest and latent content as the rapper is known for his strong writing style

that often incorporates elements of classical Persian Poetry. Safir's song is critical of the regime's control of media and the state's ability to control all forms of individual freedoms especially expression rights.⁵⁴

روزنامه ی صبح یعنی حوادث ده صفحه -- فرهنگی چهار خط تو کادری که چندسال یخ زده

The morning newspaper is filled with ten pages of misfortune, the cultural section has only a few lines
which has been frozen for years

ورزشی ضمیمه ی چند برگ سیاست -- اقتصاد حاشیه است برایش حرف در میان

Sport is all linked to politics and the economy section is all lies that have been created

چاپ خبر کذب شده سرگرمی برای سردبیر -- اینجا اصل یعنی خط خطی بشن وقایع

Publishing false news has become an entertainment for the chief-editor! Here, all the truths are
crossed out

یه خط در میون همه جا آشوبه -- ولی خبرا همیشه صلح نشون میدن

Between each line there is a revolt ongoing, but the newspapers only speak about peace

دلخون مثل دل مادری که بچه اش! رفت بر نگشت

My hearth is filled with misery like the mother whose child left but never returned home

دلخون مثل تیترا ی قرمز روزنامه ها! دلخون دل تو زندونه

My hearth is filled with misery like the red titles of newspapers. My heart is imprisoned

Ali Sorena's 'Khake Sorkh' translated as 'Red Soil' is a record of police violence in the everyday life of Iranians. 'Khake Sorkh' is arguably one of the most directly written lyrics pointing the finger towards the Iranian authorities, produced from within the country. By doing so, Sorena has put himself at great risk. Sorena's song is a great example of resistance from within. Every word used in 'Khake Sorkh' is critical about the unjust system ruling the country and the corruptions.⁵⁵ The rapper uses mainly manifest content in this song, contrary to his earlier discussed method used in 'Nemitarsam.'

نپرس چی شد کی مرد کی کشت

Don't ask me about what has happened, who died and who killed

اون که لاشخور بود همیشه سیر می خوابید

⁵⁴ Omid Safir. "Rooznameh Sobh" October 24, 2013.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8uRxGbZEvY&ab_channel=AshkanFadaei

⁵⁵ Red soil is a reference to the red color of blood. The rapper highlighting the spilled blood of innocent individuals.

Here, the evildoer always sleeps with a full stomach
 چرا عوض شد جای کروات و گیوتین
 Why did a neck tie replace itself with a guillotine?
 کی خشت رو خشت میزاره کی خاج میشه
 Who puts the bricks on bricks, and who gets to the top?⁵⁶
 چرا خون یه سری بی گناه ریخته شدن؟
 Why is the blood of some innocents poured?
 خبر مرگ جوانای کشور و روزنامه نوشت با تیتیر بلند
 The news of the killings of this country's youth has become the topic of newspapers
 یه طرف دیگه یه نفر ا گشنگی مرد
 At one side, a person died from hunger
 یه طرف دیگه یه نفرم کشته میشد
 On another side, someone got killed
 ما می کاشتیم اونا برداشتن
 We planted the seeds but the harvest was taken from us
 پلیس یالا برو اونا رو بگیر
 Police, yallah, go get them
 پلیس برو دزده پول رو بگیر
 Police, go arrest the money thieves⁵⁷
 پلیس منو بی خیال شو مشتی
 Police, leave me in peace
 باعث ریخته شدن خونا رو بگیر
 Arrest those responsible for the bloodshed⁵⁸

Alongside the songs analysed above, there remains a multitude of other rap songs produced by the Iranian underground hip-hop scene that address the subject of resistance and freedom in some aspect and engage the audiences with these important themes. It is crucial to acknowledge these creations as the youth looks up to these artists and engages with their creations. It is through these rappers that they receive additional information on the events taking place in the country but also about messages of hope and how to engage in creating change. These songs

⁵⁶ Here the rapper is making use of metaphors used in card games. The metaphors are of the symbols Clubs and Diamonds. What is meant here is that some work hard to build something while others have an unfair direct access to the top.

⁵⁷ Rapper is here referring to the multiple government official's corruption scandals.

⁵⁸ Ali Sorena. "Khake Sorkh" February 8, 2012.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rp9yHCJPiWo&ab_channel=Zirzamin

are arguably more explicit and direct than any other form of resistance expressed through language within the Iranian society.

The early work of these artists showcases the limitations which were imposed on them but at the same time demonstrates how they have shifted from those imposed boundaries towards an open field without taking in account the existing restrictions. They have taken advantage of their artistic capabilities and bravely embraced every opportunity to resist through this non-violent novel method. The Iranian underground hip-hop scene has created a new resistance method through shedding awareness about the Iranian resistance movements through their hip-hop creations.

Contrary to the actions of protest movements or rebellion, which are sporadic, the Iranian underground hip-hop scene is an ongoing, active scene that also operates and creates outside of the scope of specific resistance events. The rap scene has proved to engage with every socio-political aspect of the country even when there are no resistance movements taking place in Iran. This is arguably the strength of this scene, as it is able to leave behind a collective memory stamp. Resistance movements on the ground have the tendency to disappear with time as state control can vanquish these movements easily. Artistic creations are on the other hand difficult to suppress and continue to circulate through different channels, even at times where no on-the-ground movements are taking place.

By exploring the songs and their references to resistance movements, this chapter has arguably succeeded to portray the resisting character of the Iranian underground hip-hop scene and its focus on themes such as individual freedom and resistance. The above analysed songs are a proof on how the scene is entangled with socio-political movements in Iran. These songs are a buildup of knowledge about the injustices taking place in Iran. As argued earlier, the creations of these artists shed light on themes and events that otherwise might be forgotten. The findings also showcase the connectedness of these artists and their engagement with the violently suppressed movements. At the same time, this chapter sketched the unique character of the Iranian underground hip-hop scene and its ability to act further and broader than the previous dissident movements that have taken place so far.

The open and explicit lyrics of this scene has taken the Iranian protest language to a new level. The creations of this uncensored dissident movement, operating from the free realms of the underground, is an act of remembrance of the events that have shaped the Iranian resistance movements. Rap songs have succeeded in preserving these collective memories by referring to these events and keeping them alive. The ability of this movement to produce work that will

live forth is arguably its strength. Contrary to movements that eventually disappear, the Iranian underground hip-hop scene continues to expand its reach.

The Youth's Hip-Hop Movement

The Iranian youth are arguably the most active and relevant group within the Iranian resistance scene. This fact is connected to the demographics of the country in which the youth population are evidently the majority. The Iranian underground hip-hop scene is formed in part, through the participation of the youth in this scene.

The literature review discussed Bayat's ability to acknowledge youth movements, which he referred to as non-movements. This chapter will argue that although these groups, such as the Iranian underground hip-hop scene and the youth participating in these scenes are recognized to some extent, the interpretation on their activities often remains shallow and non-objective. This chapter aims to demonstrate the active character of the Iranian underground hip-hop scene as a youth movement. Contrary to Bayat's argument on the passivity of these 'passive-networks,' this chapter aims to showcase how Rap-e-Farsi engages the youth with the music. And which references are made about youth movements.⁵⁹

In order to do so, this chapter will analyse three songs that focus on the interaction of this scene with the subject of youth. The songs analysed beneath are all engaging in a dialogue with the youth who are playing a crucial role within the changes that are taking place within the country. The lyrics of the following songs will have interfaces with the previously analysed songs but what differentiates the upcoming tracks is their specific focus on the youth population and the form of dialogue shaped through the rappers with this group.

'Inja Irane' translating 'This is Iran' is a track recorded by Bahram, voicing the rapper's perception of the country and the issues that the youth-population are facing such as unemployment, social inequalities and brain-drain. 'Inja Irane' makes references to the youth in sections of the lyrics, such as: 'Write down; about the young man who is facing life sentence' and 'Here our generation is dealing with West-struck-ness.' Bahram's songs are extremely critical about the regime's inability to create better living standards for the younger generation. 'Inja Irane' is the portrayal of Iran in ruins and the artist's pessimistic vision on the future. The

⁵⁹ Asef Bayat. *Life as Politics : How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Second ed. (2013) P.111.

song courageously pinpoints the oppressions committed by the regime towards the younger generation and how this has affected the future of this group. Bahram uses manifest content to address his concerns. The song was written in 2008 but it remains greatly relevant upon today and it even seems like it was written for present day Iran as the issues addressed in the song are still in place.

اینجا چوبه ی داره تنبیه انحراف
Here, execution is the penalty for deviation
اینجا دین من توجیه کثافت کاریه منه
Here, my religion justifies my corruption
اینجا گفتن حقیقتم جواز نداره
Here, speaking the truth is not even permitted
اینجا بچه ده ساله قمه به دسته
Here, a ten-year-old carries a dagger in hand
مرض غرب زدگیه حالا زده به نسلت
Westernization is disease striking your generation
اینجا خاک اجداد منه; ایرانه من
This is my ancestor's soil: My Iran
داره هر روز بازم میشه ویرانه تر
This soil is becoming more ruined day by day
چرا عادت داری بالاسرت شلاق باشه؟
Why are you used to be under the shadow of a whip?
بنویس با خون مردم بی ستاره
Write down; with the blood of young people who have no future
بنویس از جوونی که زندانو پیشه داره
Write down; about the young fellow who is facing life sentence as occupation
اینجا مادر بزرگاها مون قصه نمیگن / آخه بچه ها دیگه ته قصه رسیدن
Here, grandmothers don't tell stories, because children have already seen their ends
آخه تفریح سالم جوونها سیگاریه
Here, the safest recreational activity is smoking weed
مهندس مملکتیم پشت دخل واکسیه
The engineer polishes shoes in the streets because of unemployment
اینجا نابغه هامون همشون بورسیه تو غربن
Here, all our geniuses are students in the west by scholarships
آینده ای نداری چون ایران بیمار نسلش
You have no future here, as Iran's generation is ill

فقط با رفتن راه میشه به جایی رسید

It is only by leaving this place that one might get somewhere ⁶⁰

Bahram's ability to speak about specific issues that the youth population is facing has made him one of the most popular rappers within the Iranian underground hip-hop scene. The issues addressed by the rapper often remain undiscussed in other spheres of protest. Bahram's ability to validate and protest about the daily lived dilemma's that influence the lives of this group is one of the primary reasons why the Iranian underground hip-hop scene is so beloved by the youth generation in Iran.

Ali Sorena's 'Ba Man Ghadam Bezan' is another popular song about the unity between the youth population and the importance of maintaining this unity to battle the hardships present in the society. 'Ba Man Ghadam Bezan' translating as 'Walk with Me' is a dialogue of Sorena with its fans and his followers. The rapper speaks about how this group has managed to shape a unity and has aspiring hopes to move as 'one' in order to achieve their common goals related to basic human rights.

با من قدم بزن با هر دردی که همراهِه

Walk with me, with all the pain that burdens you

با من قدم بزن من هوای تو رو نفس میکشم

Walk with me, I breath the same hopes as you

دست بپار به سمتم از کل دنیا دست میکشم

Put your hand forward towards me and I will promise to stand by your side no matter what

دلیل بیداری تووی شبهای منن روزای تو

Your daily struggles are the reason behind my sleep deprived nights

حرفه ای ترین قاب بسته روی لب های منن گوشای تو

Your ears are the most faithful listeners of my words

سکون مرگ انسان بودن، حرکت دلیل آغاز

Fear for change is the death of any individual, moving towards change leads to new beginnings

بیا به حرمت له کردن ، قانونی که به قانون نمیخورد

Come with me, together we can crush the law that is filled with lawlessness

با من قدم بزن ، محدودیت دیدته

Walk with me, limitations are only imposed visions

⁶⁰ Bahram "Inja Irane" March 13, 2008.

وقتی چشات خوب ببینه ، کسی نمیتونه چوب بچینه

When you can see the truth, no one can stand in your way

با من بیا به حرمت سنگایی که هست دور پامون

Come with me, regardless of the heavy chains keeping us from moving forward

آزاد بودنو حس کنیم ، یه قطره بسه از کل بارون

Let's feel the taste of freedom, one drop is enough for change

به حرمت تفاوت، نگاه ما با هم دوره هامون

In respect of our differences with others in this generation⁶¹

The final verse of the lyrics showcases the distinguishment that the rapper makes between the youth active within the Iranian underground hip-hop scene and those who do not share similar ideals and plans for unity and change. Sorena's last verse aims to showcase the power of rap in uniting individuals who are like minded. It creates an 'us and them' paradigm in which those listening to his music are portrayed as the creators of change for this generation.

Sorena's above studied song is in some aspects similar to Hichkas's following song: 'Man Age to Nabashi' translating as: 'If it Wasn't for You.' Both artists engage with their fans and speak about the importance of creating songs that are built upon the realities of their society by taking in consideration the stories of their listeners and their enormous support.

It is at first a bit unclear to understand who the subject of Hichkas' song is, but as the song proceeds it becomes evident that the rapper is mixing elements of latent and manifest content to thank his supporter and to recognize their importance within his artworks.

همسنگرمی

We are in this stronghold side by side

چه کنارم باشی، چه دور، چه صد قدمیم

Regardless weather you are next to me, far away or just a few steps further

شاید تا حالا یه بارم با هم حرف نزدیم

Maybe we have never spoken before

ولی به هم نزدیکیم، به نزدیکی حرفام به حقیقت

But we are close, as close as the truths that are in my words

خلاصه که تنها هم باشیم انگار چند نفریم

Even when we are alone, we never feel lonely

⁶¹ Ali Sorena "Ba Man Ghadam Bezan" February 10, 2014.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mLsuNPw3kw4&ab_channel=LyricalyPersian

بودی از اول پیشم، هیچوقت نگو فقط هیچکس
 From the beginning on you were standing right behind me
 من اگه تو نباشی
 If it wasn't for you
 دیگه چجوری واسه گنده‌ها بکنم قاطی؟
 How could I speak up and act fearless?
 اگه تو نباشی
 If it wasn't for you
 دلم رو خوش بکنم به چی وقتی هست دورم آژیر؟
 How could my heart remain hopeful when I am surrounded with sirens?
 هرچی یاد میگیرم می‌کنم به شعرا تبدیل
 Whatever I learn, I turn them in to poems for you
 چه از تو، چه اونی که می‌کنه انتقاد کشکی
 Even from those who criticize me with prejudice, I keep learning
 شاید خودت ندونی
 You might not realize
 ولی با کمک تو بود تو موسیقی انقلاب کردیم
 But thanks to your support we were able to create a revolution in music
 نسبت بهت مسئولیت دارم
 I feel responsible towards you....⁶²

‘Man Age To Nabashi’ is another valid proof of the important role of unity within the Iranian underground hip-hop scene. Hichkas’ song is a love letter to his listeners who he perceives as the main factor behind the existence of the Iranian underground hip-hop scene. The artist acknowledges that through the support of the youth, and their inputs, the scene has flourished and revolted against all the imposed measurements within the country. Calling this phenomenon ‘a revolution within the music scene of Iran’.

I built upon this statement of Hichkas by arguing that the Iranian youth and their day to day lived realities have shaped the coming to existence of a highly socio-political active underground hip-hop scene. The role of the youth within this scene is undeniable as they are the ones who write, rap, produce, spread and engage directly with the content of this music.

No other form of resistance in Iran has followed the open conversations that the underground hip-hop scene has made possible to discuss. Contrary to Bayat’s passive-networks notion on

⁶² Hichkas “Man Age To Nabashi” September 29, 2012.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TVuDADNDNZ0&ab_channel=Moltafet

the youth's activities, the songs studied in this chapter once again showcase this scene's interaction with political demand for change. It is almost unimaginable that the movement shaped by this scene has been able to survive within the restrained environment that is present in current day Iran. This proves the strength of this scene and its important role within the Iranian society.

To sum up, this chapter has once again portrayed the alive and active character of the Iranian underground hip-hop scene and specifically the important role carried out by the youth of this scene. The presence of the youth in the lyrics of the artists is a validation of their existence and participation within this scene. It is thus crucial to acknowledge their being and their role within the Iranian resistance scene.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to answer how the Iranian Hip-hop scene distinguishes its method of resistance from the already existing resistance movements within Iran. In order to answer this question this research analyzed the entanglement of this scene with the resistance movements that have taken place in Iran within the previous decades and analyzed the lyrics created by Iranian underground hip-hop artists to gain knowledge about the participation of this scene within the movements.

The earlier studied literature in this thesis focused on the themes of non-violent resistance and non-movements, introduced by Erica Chenoweth and Asef Bayat. The main objective behind choosing these concepts is related to the fact that the research recognized the non-violent description of Chenoweth in the work which the hip-hop artists have created so far and found this concept a crucial part in the method applied by this scene in engaging with resistance.

Bayat's non-movements concept highlighted the importance of acknowledging smaller movement participants such as the youth. The literature familiarized us with the notion of passive-networks. This thesis' primary argument was to showcase the activity and engagement of the Iranian underground hip-hop scene with socio-political themes. Contrary to Bayat's reference to the passivity of the networks of the youth, the lyrics analyzed in this thesis showcased that the Iranian underground hip-hop scene engagement with the concept of resistance is far from passivity and should be taken in serious consideration when analyzing resistance movements within Iran.

The content analysis in this thesis allowed us to analyze multiple songs by different rappers. The music was analyzed through the methods of latent and manifest content. By using these methods of analysis, it became evident that although hip-hop is often portrayed as a western and not necessarily new method of resistance, the Iranian hip-hop scene has succeeded in reshaping this music genre and has formed a novel method of interaction with traditional Iranian cultural heritage such as classical Persian Poetry. This has led to the creation of a novel scene with its own active networks and unique characteristics within the field of Iranian resistance methods.

I argue that all the songs that have been analyzed in the previous chapters showcase the unique method of resistance of this particular youth movement. The Iranian underground hip-hop scene's ability to criticize and participate in resistance debates through using protest language is a new and unseen method within the history of the Iranian resistance movements. Never before, has any other form of resistance method used such a direct usage of protest language. The scene's incorporation of storytelling methods has allowed it to build upon already existing knowledge about the events.

The scenes' ability to cross the censorship boundaries imposed by the regime through creating music has contributed to the survival of a collective memory on the events related to resistance movements within Iran. It is through the creation of these artists that the socio-political problems of the Iranian youth but also of the non-youth population are remaining relevant and preserved.

One could argue that dissident movements in Iran are not a newly-occurring phenomenon. I fully agree with this statement but argue that the main difference between the Iranian underground hip-hop scene and other forms of resistance is this scene's ability to survive and grow. Contrary to other resistance movements such as protest marches, the Iranian underground hip-hop scene is difficult to suppress and vanquish. The scene's ability to produce work from any geographic location and its fast method of creation through modern technology distinguishes this scene from other artistic forms of resistance such as cinema, which is dependent on geographics and more difficult to create. Resulting in work that has to adhere to the existing censorship boundaries of the regime.

By acknowledging the creations of the artists that actively participate within this scene, our understanding about resistance in Iran and the youths' visions and perspectives will become clearer. The artistic creations of this scene are of great importance. It is through these songs that one can grasp a better understanding about how the majority of the population, existing out of youth, thinks and wants to act. I am convinced that further academic research is

necessary to create a better understanding about the activities of this scene and their direct relations to the Iranian resistance scene and hope that future scholars will engage with this topic.

Finally, I want to highlight that by creating artistic creations such as the one's analyzed throughout this thesis, the artists put the lives of their beloved ones and themselves in great risk. This notion once again showcases the important role which individuals such as Hichkas, Bahram, Fadaei, Sorena, Safir and many others have to fill, in order to spread knowledge on basic human rights topics such as freedom of speech and social equalities.

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