

The Researcher as a National Security Threat

Interrogative Surveillance, Agency, and Entanglement in Iran and the United States

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Ahmad Salimi, the protagonist of a documentary film I was directing in Iran, was at a museum, visiting with the director in his office. I was in another room setting up lighting equipment for an event that Ahmad would partake in later in the day. The cinematographer was shooting b-roll around the museum and decided to get some footage of Ahmad casually talking with the director. Minutes later, the cinematographer came to me, worried. He said that while he had been shooting, Ahmad had been telling the museum director that intelligence agents began visiting his home as soon as we had started filming. My body froze. I had intentionally tried to stay as inconspicuous as possible. Our film crew was small—just me and the cinematographer—and all of our equipment fit into a backpack. Yet what I feared the most had happened—intelligence agents were questioning my interlocutor and following my activities.

“We will stop filming right now,” I said to Ahmad, determined. “Not at all! I didn’t tell you about this because I didn’t want to worry you. I just wanted to make sure Mr. Hasani knows about the situation,” Ahmad said, referring to the museum director.¹ He continued, “I know who they are. They’re men from the local office of the intelligence ministry. They came to me last week for the first time. They asked, ‘What’s the American woman asking you?’ I told them you were doing a film on me as a survivor of chemical bombs. They come by after you leave and want to make sure we’re not discussing anything else.”

Still nervous, I reiterated that we should end filming altogether. Ahmad responded emphatically, “No! They can’t tell me who to talk to and what to say. I fought for this country and I have a right to speak.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Mr. Hasani, the museum director, said to me. “The intelligence guys just want to say, ‘We’re here and we’re paying attention.’”

We’re here and we’re paying attention. The intelligence officers wanted to send a message to me and Ahmad that we were under surveillance. Yet, they did not do it under cover. In fact, the work of intelligence officers and secret police is often not secret at all.² Instead, in interactions such as these, the state un.masks itself.³ Ahmad was insistent that he would not be censored from telling his story.

In this article, I discuss what it means to be a researcher and to be regarded as a potential national security threat at the same time. I focus on my own experiences and ask, What does data gathering look like in such spaces of heightened surveillance? Specifically, I explore methodological considerations in gaining access to militarized groups for research purposes and examine what building rapport in such settings looks like. Throughout my ten years of research in Iran among members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Basij paramilitary organization, I faced a number of challenges. As in many fieldwork situations, I had to convince my interlocutors to

take risks in granting me the long-term access I needed to conduct ethnographic fieldwork. I also faced additional challenges: I could be interrogated, access to my research sites could be blocked, and I could be jailed and used as a political pawn in the larger political conflict between Iran and the United States.

The IRGC is Iran's main military arm, created after the 1979 Revolution to protect the newly established Islamic Republic from a potential coup. The IRGC was initially responsible for protecting the new government from political insurgencies in Kurdistan and the Turkomen regions of the country, as well as protecting the regime against other political groups vying for power in the postrevolutionary environment. With the advent of the Iran-Iraq war in September 1980, the IRGC eventually joined the traditional military, the *Artesh*, in protecting the country from the foreign invader. Throughout the eight-year war, the IRGC gained more power, while the *Artesh* was weakened. Today, the IRGC is the most powerful force in the political establishment of the Islamic Republic. The *Basij* is a volunteer-based paramilitary organization created after the revolution in the service of the Islamic Republic. With the Iraqi invasion in 1980, the *Basij* became the main recruitment and training center for the volunteers going to the warfront. In postwar Iran, the *Basij* became a force that policed the citizenry on public morality.

I hold dual American and Iranian citizenship. This fact alone was enough to create suspicion about a woman attempting to do long-term research among men tied to the IRGC and paramilitary *Basij* organization. It was also a basis for the men who interacted with me to be questioned by their superiors. And yet, many of my interlocutors, all men who were members of either the IRGC or the *Basij*, were determined to tell me their stories—stories that often contradicted those of the state. Although I initially received formulaic responses from them, over the span of years, I eventually gained their trust. Often, they began to insist on telling me their stories after a long process in which they tested me by using what I call interrogative surveillance.

Surveillance is often thought of as something done from afar, with the idea that those who are its subject have no knowledge of it. Yet in interrogative surveillance, subjects are fully aware that they are being surveilled, because the surveillance takes place through informal interrogation practices, which are often intimidating. Surveillance creates a set of norms and acceptable responses. If a subject knows she is being surveilled, she is supposed to act within a set of norms in order to

prove that she has nothing to hide and is not involved in any activity that would be a threat to the state. Interrogative surveillance is a dialogic surveillance that involves a particular kind of questioning. By undertaking interrogative surveillance, the interrogator not only makes the surveillance known, but also personalizes the subject through his line of questioning and his attempts to catch the subject in a lie. In this way, he individuates the subject and cuts her off from any network or group affiliation, while he remains depersonalized as the interrogator. The subject of the questioning cannot ask questions back.

When my interlocutors used interrogative surveillance, they acted the way men in Iran's military apparatus *should* act with an American researcher—with suspicion and interrogation. Yet they used this approach strategically. I knew I was under surveillance during my research. I took great care with my social media accounts, my cell phone conversations, and my computer. My phone was bugged and my computer, email, and social media accounts were hacked multiple times. I was careful about who I hung out with in my free time in Iran, not wanting to get my friends into trouble. Although I knew I was being surveilled from a distance by security forces, my intermediate interlocutors performed interrogative surveillance for a different purpose. By the time they enacted the interrogative surveillance, we had already known each other for at least two years and had interacted on numerous occasions. Surprisingly, after a long pattern of familiarity, these men would begin to ask questions that expressed suspicion. Even more surprisingly, these questions turned out to be a move toward greater openness with me—a vetting process that the men undertook before deciding to tell me their “real” stories.

Some explanation is in order.⁴ As I have written elsewhere, men in the IRGC and *Basij* consciously distinguished between the “official” (*rasmi*) story of the state that they were supposed to tell to outside audiences and their own “real” (*vaghe-i*) story that contradicted the official story.⁵ I argue that despite the fact that the Islamic Republic more broadly, and the IRGC more specifically, attempt to control what is known about them, their members exercise resistance by using interrogative surveillance to make space for their stories. In other words, interlocutors use the interrogation techniques of the national security apparatus, but they do so in order to test the researcher and to see if it is safe for them to break protocol. These informal interrogative moments can be a space of possibility inside a

regime of surveillance. Discourses of national security can be performative tools used by those in formal positions of power to open spaces for agency and resistance to the official discourses of the state.

In this article, I explore how other anthropologists have dealt with issues of surveillance during fieldwork. I then discuss how I established access and began to learn how to see the dialogic possibility of interrogative surveillance. The article then looks at the ways the US government and my university targeted me for an intrusive investigation due to my dual nationality, revealing how being a “national security problem” is not just an issue inside Iran. I then discuss how potential interlocutors tested me before trusting me with their stories, and I conclude with an example of how my research interlocutors warded off an attempt to formally detain me by breaking the orbit of surveillance through vouching.

Anthropology, National Security, and Surveillance

Anthropologists have explored questions of state surveillance and secrecy in state formation.⁶ As Max Weber and later Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer argue, the state is produced through a claim to authority and legitimacy, which necessitates not only the subjugation of others, but also an attempt to conceal this subjugation.⁷ Surveillance becomes necessary, then, in order to ensure that no entity threatens the legitimacy of the state. In twentieth- and twenty-first-century postrevolutionary societies, in particular, surveillance takes on a heightened form. Intelligence officers and secret police need to ensure that internal and external enemies pose no danger to the revolution.⁸

Katherine Verdery sheds light on these processes in her important study of the ways in which she was surveilled as an anthropologist in Soviet Romania.⁹ She reads the file the Romanian secret police created about her to understand the work of the secret police and its connection to secrecy and the social relationships of surveillance. Verdery provides insight into how a state “sees” an ethnographic researcher and how it embeds her in broader notions of national security. Verdery’s position as an outsider during the Cold War has certain similarities to the case I describe. However, there are important differences. First, as a US citizen with no Romanian passport, her loyalty to the United States was not questioned. Second, unlike Iran, Romania had an American embassy, meaning that Verdery could rely on American help to leave the country safely with her research materials. The fact that I was between states—states that were not on speaking terms—raises a dif-

ferent set of research questions. Soviet Romania also has key differences with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Importantly, Iran’s security apparatus, although large, does not completely envelop life in Iran. Iran, unlike former Soviet republics, is not a police state, and thus it allowed more flexibility for my research interlocutors to speak critically.

In subfields across the discipline, anthropologists have tended to conduct research with groups of people toward whom they are sympathetic. One of the most common reasons for this tendency is that anthropology’s method of long-term ethnographic fieldwork necessitates a certain level of trust between researchers and interlocutors. This trust is usually easier to establish if there is affinity between the two parties. There are notable exceptions and calls for researchers to turn their attention to communities that they may morally oppose.¹⁰ Yet doing so entails being willing to spend years building rapport and to accept surveillance and the threat of imprisonment. In certain cases, the researcher may have to take on a different identity altogether, as in the compelling work on neo-Nazis in Germany by Nitzan Shoshan, a Jew.¹¹

As I’ve already explained, I did not have the protections of the US government while conducting research. Quite the opposite, in fact. The US government, specifically the Treasury Department and the State Department, made it harder for me to conduct my research, as I discuss below. In Iran, on the other hand, I was an Iranian citizen and my American passport was a liability; although I knew that in the event of imprisonment having a foreign passport also meant that I would not be subject to the same torture as Iranian colleagues with no other passport. With ties to a Western university, I could also count on international pressure being put on the Iranian government for my release, as was evident in the case of Iranian-Canadian anthropologist Homa Hoodfar.

The severing of diplomatic ties between Iran and the United States following the 1979 Iranian Revolution and subsequent takeover of the American Embassy, which resulted in American diplomats being held hostage for 444 days, has created a wide rift between the two countries. The long American presence in Iran prior to the revolution was characterized by power plays and direct meddling for control and access to resources.¹² After the revolution, the United States overtly supported Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88), including turning a blind eye to Iraq’s extensive use of chemical weapons for five years of the war. The United

States has accused Iran of being the biggest state sponsor of terrorism, and the struggle over financially destabilizing Iran through sanctions continues, despite the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or the Iran Deal in 2015, which the Trump administration severed in 2018. It is safe to say that relations between the two countries are profoundly estranged. In such a setting, dual nationals are regarded suspiciously by both governments—as potential spies in Iran, and potential conduits for avoiding sanctions in the United States. Moreover, they are often used as political pawns in the ongoing estrangement between the two countries.

Establishing Access

Overall, conducting long-term social scientific research in Iran following the 1979 revolution is difficult, especially for those residing in the West.¹³ Despite the challenges associated with participant-observation research in Iran, there has been a surge of groundbreaking work in the past decade on various aspects of Iranian society.¹⁴ Yet gaining the access required to do long-term participant-observation research with regime cultural producers in Iran has its particular challenges, and it took me years to gain the access I needed.

It took me nearly four years to get the introductions required for this research, three years of constant visits and fieldwork to get the level of access necessary, and another two years of long-term fieldwork on the project. The main parts of my research took place during the second term of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency, in the aftermath of the suppression of the Green Movement.¹⁵ I first met Basijis and members of the IRGC when I was living in Iran in 2004–6. An earthquake in the southern town of Bam in December 2003 had killed twenty-six thousand people. I had embarked on a project for one of Iran's foremost nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to put together a database of various NGOs in an attempt to create networks of organizations to respond to natural disasters. Through this project, I was introduced to an NGO that worked with survivors of chemical weapons in Iran, mainly veterans. After multiple visits with them, one of their directors kindly asked me if I wanted to join them on an upcoming trip to Kurdistan to visit survivors, and in turn get to know organizations working in the region. Curious about their work, and wanting to include organizations in the Kurdish parts of the country in the database, I cautiously accepted the invitation.

It was my first time spending more than a few minutes in the presence of regime paramilitaries. As the

child of a leftist father and a mother whose family was split between cabinet members of Mohammad Mosadegh's government and those who held high-ranking political positions for the Shah, I had grown up hearing horror stories of what the paramilitaries had done to political prisoners following the establishment of the Islamic Republic. For me at the time, these men were the epitome of evil. My father and uncles barely escaped a raid by regime paramilitaries at their mother's funeral in Isfahan when my mother was pregnant with me. Every leftist activist who was caught in Isfahan that day was executed later in the week under the orders of Sadegh Khalkhali, known as the "hanging judge" of the Islamic Republic. My parents' close friends had been executed in the political prisons of the 1980s by men who looked like the ones with whom I was about to take a trip. Growing up in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area surrounded by exiled Iranian leftist activists, what I knew of the Islamic Republic was stories of torture and execution. During our summer trips to Iran, men who looked like these paramilitaries constantly barked at me in public to fix my veil and arrested me when I was only twelve years old because I was not veiled properly. I did not yet know how to tell the difference between all the factions and forces. To someone raised abroad, these men all blended together.

When I sat on the plane to Kurdistan in 2005, I was nervous, wondering if I had been naive to take this trip alone with strange men to a part of the country where I had never been and knew no one. The man sitting next to me, Mohammad, a young veteran with a full beard who still served as an active Basiji, had not looked at me the entire time we were in the airport getting ready to leave. We were both uncomfortable sitting next to each other. He looked away, and I pretended to read my book, not even offering him a simple hello.

Like in a bad movie, our flight was delayed on the tarmac for almost two hours. Eventually, I asked Mohammad a question about our trip and we began a conversation that did not end until we landed in Kurdistan. Before we got off the plane, he said to me, "You know, miss, the Mohammad of 18 years ago would never talk to a person like you."

"To be perfectly honest with you," I responded, "the Narges of just three hours ago was too terrified to speak with any of you." For the first time during the whole flight, he lifted his head and looked me in the eyes, shocked that I would be so straightforward regarding my fears about regime supporters. That trip and subsequent meetings I had with members of the

organization that worked with chemical bomb survivors opened my eyes to the diversity of those who are pro-regime. I became curious about the range of people in these organizations. I also became impressed by their work with survivors of chemical warfare. I got to know them more and more throughout the years, and eventually I helped set up an oral history project to record the stories of chemical bomb survivors, as many were slowly dying of cancer or collapsed lungs due to their exposures. I eventually directed a documentary about survivors, *The Skin That Burns* (2012).

Throughout those initial four years of working on issues of chemical warfare, I met hundreds of veterans and current members of the IRGC and Basij. My relationships with these veterans proved essential to my ability to carry out my later research with IRGC and Basij media producers. The work I had done with the survivors was “proof” that I was interested and able to be an empathetic observer to those who were pro-regime, even if I did not share their worldview. The physicians whom I had worked with to establish the oral history project, veterans themselves, were key in introducing me to their colleagues who were regime cultural producers. It then took another two years to build enough trust and rapport with the media producers of the regime until I was granted full access. Despite the success of my efforts in this case, I feel confident that I would not have been granted access if I had been trying to investigate the IRGC’s business dealings, for example. My interlocutors found my interest in cinema and films to be nonpolitical and, thus, not suspect. Moreover, given the widespread academic and popular attention Iranian art films have received, they wanted an American academic to write about their filmic productions, since they invest significant time and money in their endeavors.

Although I had grown up mostly in the United States, I had spent nearly all of my twenties living and studying in Iran. By the time I started my research, Tehran had become home, and I could get around easily. I also was able to code switch easily between official and unofficial spaces. It is my assumption that I was able to do this fieldwork because of the linguistic and cultural knowledge that I had been building over these years.

Yet for the purposes of this research project, I learned early that “passing” was dangerous. A veteran and high-ranking officer of the IRGC I was interviewing became suspicious of me when I first began the research. We were supposed to meet for a second interview at his office in the afternoon. That morning he called me on

my landline number (which I had not given him). “Let’s change the interview to your place,” he told me. “Let me give you the address,” I said. “I already know where you are,” he responded, and hung up. I barely had time to figure out what had just happened and calm my nerves before he rang my doorbell. He purposely sought to intimidate me and to let me know that he could find out information about me easily. I had nothing to hide, but I knew that the mere fact of being Iranian American and interested in talking to regime supporters was sufficiently suspect.

As soon as he entered and sat down, before he could even open his mouth, I began:

I know you have doubts about me. My family left Iran when I was four years old. My father was a leftist. Many of his close friends were executed, and others imprisoned. We left Iran because he could no longer stay. I grew up terrified of you all. But I have learned throughout the years that the story is much more complicated than I understood. I would like to know your story through your own words.

When I blurted this, without taking a breath, it was a result of my nerves and my naïveté. No one in their right mind would tell a hardline regime supporter with obvious ties to the intelligence community that she came from a counterrevolutionary family, especially during the second term of the Ahmadinejad presidency, which was marked by a severe crackdown on civil society, journalists, academics, and activists. But I had reasoned that if he had ties to the intelligence community (or was an agent himself), then he would already know my family background, so why not offer it myself and prove to him that I had nothing to hide? If I was willing to disclose my father’s political allegiance, which was considered an “enemy” background, then I could not be hiding much else. In essence, I broke the protocol of interrogative surveillance. Instead of allowing him to question me and be forced to respond with the expected formulaic answers, I preempted him. I moved out of the familiar framework of suspicion and interrogation common in Iran with those who work for the regime. In the interrogative moment, a dialogic possibility exists. By beating him to the punch, so to speak, I was able to keep our conversation going, rather than allowing it to be completely shut off. And my answer also opened a certain possibility: that I might not be merely the leftist daughter of my leftist father. By framing my positioning to him, and others in the future, as wanting to know more about their stories, I left open the possibility that

their worldview might convince, or, in a sense, convert me. My confession had an internal temporality that led to an invitation to hear their side.

Being a Problem for Both Sides

As I have already mentioned, the issue of access and being a potential national security threat was not only relevant in Iran, but also in the United States. Conducting research in the Middle East or on Middle Eastern Americans and Muslim Americans presents challenges in the post-9/11 United States.¹⁶ American foreign policy in the region since 9/11 has been destructive, creating difficult circumstances for researchers. With America's prolonged wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, its support of the repressive states of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel, and its material assistance for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, there are heightened security issues across the Middle East for American researchers. On the other hand, attacks in Western cities by dual nationals claiming allegiance to such groups as Al Qaeda and ISIS have created an environment in which immigrants and diaspora communities from the Middle East are viewed through the lens of national security by Western governments. Suspicion of dual citizens has a long history in the United States. Questions of divided loyalties and fears of the "enemy within" have often resurfaced, especially in times of overseas wars, as was the case with the internment of Japanese Americans. I was subject to a long bureaucratic process that involved my university's legal team and the US government, including being asked by a university administrator if I was a double agent.

The situation that triggered this incident was an email from the chair of my department to me months before I was to begin my fieldwork in Iran. He informed me that the university's legal counsel and top administrators were concerned about my research, after being contacted by one of the external granting agencies I had applied to for research funds. Apparently, this granting agency had called my university's administrators in alarm. The agency was concerned about the fact that I would be doing research with "banned" individuals in Iran, given the robust US sanctions against Iran at the time. That phone call started a process that took over nine months. I tried to get more information from the Treasury Department and spoke to various offices within the Obama administration, while my university's legal counsel performed due diligence to ensure that one of its doctoral students could undertake this research without violating US sanctions. I had to attend

several meetings over the span of months with high-level university administrators. One administrator in particular asked for a number of meetings with me over these months.

In our first one-on-one meeting, this administrator placed three sets of papers in front of me. One was the Wikipedia entry for the Basij. Another was an article about the killing of Neda Agha Soltan during the Green Movement and the role that the Basij played in the suppression of the movement. And a third was a US government fact sheet on the Basij and the IRGC. He asked me if I knew what the Basij was and pointed to the Wikipedia printout. Then he turned his attention to the story of Neda's death, which was recorded on a cell phone camera and spread internationally on YouTube and social media. "You know the Basij did this. Were you with them when they killed her?" he asked me.

I was shocked at first at the crassness of the question. I began to reply that I was actually protesting in the Green Movement too, and that doing research on the group did not mean that I sympathized with them. He then continued, not satisfied, "Do you work for the Basij? Do you know how terrible they are? How can you be around them?" At that point I tried to stay as diplomatic as possible. I knew that he could shut down my research by telling his colleagues that he was not satisfied with my answers and that the university would be in legal jeopardy with the US government if I were allowed to go. I began to tell him about my background and why I sought to do this research. "Do your sympathies lie with America or Iran?" he finally asked.

Offended, I asked back, "Do you ask all researchers you meet this question, or is this just reserved for those of us who have family ties to the Middle East?" He said he had not meant to offend me, but wanted to make sure I "understood what I was getting myself into." I assured him that since I had been working on this project for some years, I understood what I was working on better than a Wikipedia entry could express. My point in recounting this interaction is not to call out the administrator per se, but rather to point to a system in which certain kinds of research and certain kinds of researchers become suspect.

Once the countless meetings with university administrators finished and they eventually felt comfortable with my research, the university's legal counsel then did everything in their power to support my case and get the necessary permits I needed from the US government. It quickly became apparent that my university was afraid of being held accountable by the US

Department of Treasury for violating sanctions against Iran. Having conducted long-term research in Iran since 2004, I knew what a researcher was and was not allowed to do in the country. But I was in for a rude awakening in 2013 when I applied to continue my research. I did not expect the extent to which the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC, a part of the Department of Treasury) intimidated university administrators with its regulations. Although officials at the Department of Treasury stated that they did not intend for the Iran sanctions to hinder academic research, the fact that the wording of the regulations was vague gave university officials and their legal departments cause for concern. Given that I was doing research with “Specially Designated Nationals,” the US government’s code word for “terrorists,” it took nine months and tens of thousands of dollars in lawyers’ fees (paid by my university) for me to finally receive an OFAC license to conduct research in Iran.

I was conducting my research during the height of the international sanctions against Iran. Although the sanctions include an exemption for “journalistic activities,” and an exemption for “academic exchanges” at the undergraduate level, OFAC has not issued an exemption for academic researchers and advises all academics to apply for a license. Until March 2014, when OFAC started issuing General License G, allowing for limited academic exchange between universities in Iran and the United States, OFAC had banned all American researchers from taking a laptop, cell phone, voice recorder, hard drive, or camera to Iran. Instead, academics, myself included, were told to purchase all of this equipment in Iran and then resell it before they left the country. As for how to store research material and data without a laptop or hard drive that could be brought back to the United States, OFAC encouraged us to store our work in the cloud—a comical suggestion for anyone who has spent long periods of time in Iran, where internet speeds are continually toyed with depending on the political climate, and internet connections are far from secure, placing in potential jeopardy not only research material, but, worse, the identity of one’s interlocutors.

I was extremely lucky to have the unconditional support of my department throughout the entire ordeal, as well as the eventual support of my university’s legal counsel, who filed my application to the Treasury Department and was in touch with the State Department and ensured its success. My university paid large legal fees for both in-house counsel and outside counsel to put together my permit applications and followed

up with both the Treasury Department and the State Department until my research received approval. Even though I was eventually granted permission to do my research, the level of scrutiny and administrative and legal interrogation I was put through in the United States was far more extensive than anything I underwent in Iran. At one point, the lawyers working on my university’s behalf asked me to write a document outlining every trip I had ever taken to Iran, including as a child. They asked me to include a list of all the people I had ever met with (including family), and the addresses of all of these individuals. I resisted this request, telling them they had no right to ask me to disclose my family and friends’ personal information in Iran, or to know what I had done as a child or teenager on summer vacations in the country. They pushed back, saying that this level of detail might be required by the State Department, that it was an issue of “national security.” Eventually, we compromised and I only gave this information for people I had met once I had begun doing research in Iran. Yet, the cloud of “national security” from the United States hung over my head throughout the entire period of my research.

Being Tested

War veterans in Iran hold a prized place in society. The Iran-Iraq war (1980–88) came on the heels of the 1979 Revolution, and it solidified the newly established Islamic Republic. The war’s importance for Iranian statecraft in the past forty years cannot be overstated. Since many of the men who fought in that war did so as volunteers, they are regarded not merely as soldiers, but as the very protectors of the revolution. Within the political lore of the Islamic Republic, the Basijis and Sepahis (IRGC members) who fought in the war hold pride of place in the protection and advancement of the Islamic Republic. As guardians of the revolution, they have much more leeway to critique the state or politicians than do nonveterans in Iran, hence Ahmad’s refusal to be bullied by the intelligence ministry and his desire to finish the film. Indeed, because these veterans had participated in the foundational war of the Islamic Republic, they benefited from discursive room to maneuver within the politics of Iran. They were eager to tell me their stories, because they were tired of being misrepresented inside and outside Iran.

The more time I spent around veterans, the more they began sharing their stories with me. Yet it was nearly always in a one-on-one setting, and only after they had personally vetted me. Within the Islamic Republic, the

state holds a monopoly over the story of the Iran-Iraq war. As the Islamic Republic's foundational story, the war represents the defining moments for the state and what it stands for. As such, who is allowed to narrate his story of the war is a politically contentious issue. Many veterans see the state's version as propaganda, and they have engaged in public debates about this issue on state television, in films, and on the pages of national newspapers.¹⁷ Because of this, some of the many veterans who did not agree with the official memorialization of the war wanted to tell me their stories. Like Ahmad Salimi, whom I had been filming, they resented being silenced. As veterans who not only had fought in a bloody war, but also had solidified the Islamic Republic in the process, they saw it as their right to speak. Yet they only did so after they gauged that they could trust me. They tested me in ways that enacted interrogative surveillance.

On one of my trips to the south of the country with a group of veterans, Mr. Yazdi, a veteran whom I had met four years prior and with whom I had numerous interactions over those years, began to test me to see if he could trust me with his story. He found me standing alone at an event during our trip and he asked me, once again, why my family had left Iran. The next day, during a lecture on the war, I was in the back of the room, where I normally sat in order to take notes and observe the gathering. He came and sat next to me in the middle of the lecture and whispered, "Are you religious?" In a theocracy, this question is loaded with political and social meaning, and many Iranians have perfected the double speak it requires to answer such a question without revealing any potentially compromising details, especially in more official settings.

"I don't mean to be nosy," he said. But I began to detect that he was trying to test how honest I would be with him in order to determine if he could tell me what was on his mind. I answered honestly that I was not raised religiously. He brought his head up in shock and looked me in the eyes, eyebrows raised, "You mean you don't do *namaz* (prayer)?" "No," I answered. "Do you fast during Ramadan?" he continued. "No," I answered again. He smiled at me and then leaned closer, "Please don't say that to anyone else! You know answering like that can get you in trouble in Iran."

Satisfied, on the last day of our trip, he finally approached me. We had been traveling all day and I was exhausted. We were at a market in the southern city of Abadan, on the Iraqi border, and everyone from the group was enjoying themselves over tea and cookies.

I decided to get back on the bus to try to take a quick nap and left the group without saying anything. Minutes after I sat down in my seat and put my head down, Mr. Yazdi climbed onto the bus and asked me shyly if he was bothering me. I told him not at all, and he sat on the seat in front of me. "I know we've been talking and you're doing your research, but I don't want you to leave Iran without knowing my story," he said. He looked down at his hands, then at the door of the bus to make sure no one was coming, before continuing in a soft voice: "Please don't tell this to the others. Although they're my friends, but still, you never know."

"I regret the day I went to the war. Look at what it did to me. It destroyed me as a human being. Some of these guys," he said, gesturing toward our group sitting outside, "benefited from the war. Not to mention the heads of state (*saran-e mamlekat*), who were the ultimate beneficiaries. They're all so rich now. But it destroyed me. My wife divorced me because I couldn't control my anger. My kids don't know how to communicate with me because they're afraid I'll explode at them. I don't blame them. The war still affects me and I can't control my anger. Don't believe all you see here about the glories of the war. Let me tell you, there was nothing glorious about it."

Mr. Yazdi had used interrogative surveillance to determine if he could share his story with me. To anyone looking at us from the outside, Mr. Yazdi was acting "correctly" in questioning me on key issues such as prayer and religion (at other times, interlocutors questioned me on my thoughts about Israel and Palestine, my opinions about the Supreme Leader's latest speech, or the political developments in the region). They were trying to see if I would give them the answers I was expected to give on these issues, or if I would break the norm. The more honestly I answered, the more willing they eventually were to open up beyond the "official speak" of the Islamic Republic. Paradoxically, giving the "wrong" answers in terms of regime ideology is what got me access to their "real" stories. It was more important to them to be able to judge my integrity than to believe me to be on "their side" politically. In this way, they used interrogative surveillance to create the potential space to share their story away from the gaze of official eyes.

Temporary Exits from the Orbit of Surveillance

Weeks after I had found out that intelligence officers were visiting the home of Ahmad Salimi, I traveled with him, Mr. Hasani (the museum director), and a group of seventeen veterans and their families to the south of the

country, where the war had begun. The trip culminated with a large ceremony commemorating the war. My cinematographer was not with me, and I was filming the ceremony on my own. We were on a flat terrain of sand and dirt with a large river behind us. In the middle of the large crowd was a massive container that cameramen began to climb up on in order to have a better view of the ceremony. The men I was traveling with encouraged me to join the other men with cameras to get better footage. I was hesitant. In the conservative setting of a war commemoration ceremony, I knew I would draw attention as the only female up there. But the men told me not to worry, that they would have my back. "Plus, you have your credentials around your neck," one of them said, referring to the ad hoc credentials they had created for me to make me look "official" while I was out filming, so that I would not be questioned. I climbed on top of the container and turned on the camera. After just a few moments, I heard women from below say, "What does she think she's doing? Look at her!" Then I heard gasps from the crowd and the words "Look at her! No shame!"

At first I ignored what I heard. Then came, "Get her down! She's disrespecting our martyrs! By God get her down or we'll drag her down!" A woman was yelling at a Basiji man who was standing guard. The young man craned his neck to see what the woman wanted and then suddenly, his eyes fell on me. He scaled the ladder of the container with such speed that it felt like only seconds until he was up at my eye level. He charged towards me with his hand raised: "Who do you think you are? Get down right now!" I started to tell him that I was there with the museum. I showed him my credentials, and I looked around for the men I had come with, but I could not find them. He yelled back, buoyed by the crowd, "I don't care who you are here with. Get down before I bash your head in!"

Alarmed at his threat and knowing that if I didn't get down quickly and deescalate the situation, he could discover that I was also an American. I got down the ladder as fast as I could. The crowd began to close in on me, and I turned and bolted for our bus, parked about fifty feet away. I banged on the door, waking the driver up from his nap. I got on and asked him to close the door and keep it shut.

About twenty minutes later, one of the men whom I had been traveling with got on the bus. He said, "I heard what happened to you. Don't worry about it. Everything is calm now, come back outside." I refused to leave the bus. When he realized how shaken up I was, he left to

talk with the other men. I stayed on the bus until everyone boarded an hour later and we headed to the airport to catch a flight back to Tehran. As I waited at the departure gate at the airport, Mr. Hasani called me over. He introduced me to a man who was with him, the provincial commander of the IRGC. "I told him what happened to you this afternoon," Mr. Hasani said to me.

The commander looked at me and said, "It shouldn't have happened, miss. Mr. Hasani told me that he and his colleagues have known you for a long time and that you're here spending all this time making a film about chemical warfare. I want to let you know that I've admonished the Basiji who disrespected you." He flicked his hand to a man standing behind him. The man went to an office to the side of the gate and brought out the young Basiji man who had threatened to bash my head in. The young man lowered his eyes when he saw me and said, "Please excuse my behavior." He was then dismissed.

After he left, Mr. Hasani said to me, "He had no right to scare you like that. He was abusing his power and he needs to learn." Given Mr. Hasani's reputation and position, he had access to high levels of military power. By making the man apologize to me and by having his superiors also apologize on his behalf, Mr. Hasani not only unmasked the regime's surveillance and intimidation for a brief but important moment, but crucially, by vouching for me, he allowed me to exit the orbit of surveillance at a critical moment.¹⁸ Later I learned that the young Basiji had called in his commander and put in a request to search for me and arrest me. Mr. Hasani and his colleagues at the museum found out about this young man's behavior shortly after I went to hide on the bus. Mr. Hasani quickly called the commander, vouched for me, and deescalated the situation. Precisely by vouching for me, he cast me as belonging to his network and demonstrated to the local IRGC and Basij that I was not to be the subject of interrogation because I belonged in his orbit. In this way, he kept them from discovering that I was a dual national visiting from the United States. He not only allowed me to continue my research, but also prevented them from creating a file in my name, which would have followed me on any subsequent trips to the south of the country, or in any other parts of the country. For that time in Abadan, Mr. Hasani had protected me from being a subject of surveillance and possible detention by challenging the very presumption of suspicion against me.

Conclusion

Conducting research on topics of national security and within spaces of national security is tricky and entails years of rapport building. However, as I hope this article shows, this difficult context can actually generate ways for research interlocutors to utilize interrogative surveillance to create openings for resistance to official narratives. Surveillance can often hinder research. However, it can also be used strategically by those who are in the position of surveillant to open up space for interactions beyond what is nominally allowed. In this way, although practices of national security and surveillance are meant to curtail one's activities, they can also further one's work if research interlocutors have a desire to sidestep the official stories they are charged with upholding. Interrogative surveillance and strategic practices of vouching, as Mr. Hasani demonstrated, are ways in which research interlocutors tied to the state make space for engagement and ensure that their stories are able to challenge the state's monolithic narratives.

I also hope that this article demonstrates that national security as a trope is not only used by authoritarian states such as Iran to restrict research access, but also by the US government. Issues of surveillance are not just the territory of secret police and intelligence officers "over there," but very much the domain of the government right here.

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Notes

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1. I have changed the names of all interlocutors, in order to protect their privacy. Only Ahmad Salimi's name has not been changed, because he consented to appear in the documentary film, and all subsequent writing about it, with his real name.
2. Verdery, *Secrets and Truths*; Nugent, "States, Secrecy, Subversives."
3. Nugent, "States, Secrecy, Subversives."

4. Note that I am not talking about formal interrogations here. Instead, I focus on informal interrogations. For a discussion of formal interrogations, especially in the political prisons of Iran, see Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions*; Rejali, *Torture and Modernity*; and Talebi, *Ghosts of Revolution*.

5. Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*.

6. Aretxaga, "Maddening States"; Bourdieu, "Rethinking the State"; Coronil, *The Magical State*; Ferguson and Gupta, "Spatializing States"; Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*; Greenhouse, "Hegemony"; Joseph and Nugent, *Everyday Forms*; Masco, "Sensitive but Unclassified"; Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*; Taussig, *The Nervous System*, Taussig, *The Magic*, and Taussig, *Defacement*; Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*; Trouillot, "The Anthropology of the State"; Vincent, *Anthropology and Politics*.

7. Weber, "Politics"; Corrigan and Sayer, *The Great Arch*.

8. For more on the friend/enemy divide in revolutionary systems, see Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*.

9. Verdery, *Secrets and Truths*.

10. Bangstad, "Doing Fieldwork"; Holmes, *Integral Europe*; Kalb, "Conversations"; Gingrich and Banks, *Neo-Nationalism*; Thorleifsson, "Disposable"; Shoshan, *Management of Hate*.

11. Shoshan, *Management of Hate*.

12. Abrahamian, *The Coup*.

13. A number of scholars have been detained in past years, including Haleh Esfandiary and Ramin Jahanbegloo.

14. Erami, "Rates"; Harris, *Social Revolution*; Keshavarzian, *Bazaar*; Khosravi, *Young*; Mahdavi, *Passionate*; Malekzadeh, "Schooled"; Manoukian, *City*; Najmabadi, *Professing*; Osanloo, *Women's Rights*; Tawasil, "Howzevi"; Varzi, *Warring*; Wellman, "Feeding."

15. The Green Movement was a response to the 2009 presidential elections in Iran. Supporters of candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karrubi believed that the vote had been rigged in favor of the incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Protests began the day the elections results were announced, with the slogan "Where is my vote?" The Green Movement soon initiated the largest national mass demonstrations in Iran since the 1979 Revolution. It was heavily suppressed throughout 2009 and 2010.

16. Deeb and Winegar, *Anthropology's Politics*.

17. Behrouzan, *Prozak Diaries*; Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed*.

18. Nugent, "States, Secrecy, Subversives."

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