

REVIEW ESSAY

## Navigating “Sensitive” States: How Surveillance Practices Affect Research Development between the United States and Iran

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I had completed two months of exploratory dissertation research in Tehran in the winter of 2015 when I was called in for questioning by two men who declined to provide me with their names or that of the office they called from. We met in an unmarked building adjacent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in downtown Tehran. They were middle-aged and sat on opposite sides of a table with a framed picture of Ayatollah Khomeini. When they offered me tea, I declined, remembering my cousins’ hurried advice an hour earlier. “God forbid someone puts something in your drink and they take you away to a different location,” he had said.

The official who carried out most of the questioning had a full head of hair, a big smile, and a legal pad that he used to take notes, while the other sat back in his chair, quietly looking at me over his glasses. My flight out of Tehran was scheduled for the following day but, for now, the quiet interrogator was twirling my passport in slow circles between his thumb and pointer finger while his colleague asked: “So, tell us about your research interests in film.” I told them about my interest in the post-revolutionary experimental films of Mohsen Makhmalbaf, aware of the fact that this director’s work is now part of the Iranian film canon and no longer considered threatening to the regime. This was the apolitical research description I had prepared with Iranian scholar mentors ahead of my trip.

Over my fifteen years studying and researching in Iran, I had become practiced at providing vague research descriptions to curious, suspicious bureaucrats. Still, it was difficult to understand how serious this particular interrogation was, or whether it would become serious based on my responses. They wanted to know whose homes I had visited. I replied that I only visited family, not wanting to provide the names or addresses of friends. Still smiling, the interrogator asked, “Who are you in contact with, [Abbas] Kiarostami?” I replied emphatically, “No, how could I possibly interview Kiarostami?” Implying that the renowned director (whom, at that time in 2015, was still living) was far too famous for me to seek an audience with. He pressed forward, “But aren’t you interested in the people of Iran, and not just films, isn’t this what anthropology is about?” He continued, still smiling, “and what about independent film, aren’t you particularly interested in women’s films?” At that moment, I began to recognize the words I had used in an email sent months ago to Ahmad Kiarostami, the film director’s son based in San Francisco, California.

We stared at each other, and the tone of the interrogation began to shift. I continued recognizing bits and pieces of my own words peppered throughout his refrain: “Who are you in contact with?” His questions became more like a test, and my responses felt like a dance. One by one the names of directors were drawn forth. Slowly but more readily, I offered the names of friends whose films had screened at the Cinema Verite Festival (Haghighat) in Tehran,

knowing that national festivals received screening permits from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Having already passed through state censors, these films would not be seen as threatening to the government's Islamic gender ideology. I also noticed that my interrogators did not write down the names of directors who screened at the Cinema Verite Festival.

I tried my best to avoid naming feminist directors, the ones I knew had already faced interrogation, government harassment, and censorship of their work. Finally, my interrogator said, "Shima?"<sup>1</sup> "...Oh yes, that's right, Shima," I replied hesitantly. He waited. "I never learned her last name nor have I seen her film, but I know she's a director," I said, filling the silence. I saw him write down a longer name, which looked to me like the director we both had in mind. I was thankful that the names of other "feminist-y" directors I had interviewed were neither prompted by my interrogators nor drawn from my personal correspondences, perhaps escaping their surveillance. I made a mental note to contact Shima later through an encrypted messaging app.

As the questioning wore on, it became clear that my interrogators' core concern was that I was a feminist researcher (pronounced *feminist-y* in interrogator Farsi) interested in topics of sexuality. Their questions centered around what kind of film about transgender people I planned to make. At first, I denied being interested in specifically feminist topics, trying to minimize my feminism by detailing my interest in experimental documentaries. After giving me ample space to describe the apolitical metaphors in these films as un-related to feminism, my interrogator spoke to me for the first time in English: "Is that so? Then tell me about your work as the 'Emerging Leader' at the Association for Feminist Anthropology?" I was dumbfounded. I could have laughed in a less tense circumstance. Apparently, this graduate student award from the Association for Feminist Anthropology was part of the Iranian government's surveillance file on me.

"What kind of 'feminist-y' film will you make? Who will you work with? Are you searching for transsexuals?"<sup>2</sup> I had no plans and no existing collaborations related to filmmaking in Iran, and I explained this like a broken record. As we neared the third hour, my throat was parched from speaking and declining beverages. The interrogation was beginning to run in circles and we were all tired. Flatly, the smiling man said, "I think you are interested in feminist topics and transsexual films and that you will be doing this 'feminist-y' research and filmmaking in Iran."

Feeling exasperated, I asked, "Well, should I continue my research in Iran or not?" They both assured me that I could return for my fieldwork in the future. I was surprised by their response, which quickly transformed into a jovial, accommodating tone, the kind Iranians use when welcoming you into their home. This was an abrupt change of atmosphere after three hours of intimidation. They seemed to be waiving away my concern about future surveillance and interrogations. "Well, before I return to Iran, can I have a phone number or email for someone in your office so that I can get your permission for my project?" They again declined to provide their names or that of their office. "If we have questions in the future, we will contact you." They released me and I flew home fourteen hours later.

I wish I had asked whether women making films is illegal in Iran, although I knew this was not the case. In fact, scholars of Iranian cinema speculate that Iranian women have created more films than Iranian men in recent years, albeit with lower budgets, less viewership, and more government harassment and censorship.<sup>3</sup> Even in the absence of a written law or clear statement about which aspects of my research plans were and were not allowed, my interrogators' emphasis and suspicion made me feel like I was on the brink of breaking an un-written rule. They made it clear to me which topics were "sensitive" (*hasasi*) and likely

<sup>1</sup> The names of censored directors are anonymized here.

<sup>2</sup> This offensive term, used here to describe trans\* people, is a direct translation of the word used by my interrogators. This is telling of the Iranian state's violent view of people who fall outside their Islamic gender binary.

<sup>3</sup> Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

to provoke further questions and concerns in the future: women's, feminist, and trans\* subjects.

### Political Tensions and Surveillance Practices

Although not always discussed in candid or clear terms, researchers who conduct fieldwork in Iran often face interrogations like the one described above. The boundaries of allowed and disallowed topics of study are not codified through stoic legalese or even clear verbal statements by government officials. Rather, this can only be ascertained through the state's expression of sensitivities (*hasasi*) towards topics which, at different political moments, can be seen as more or less threatening to the state. Some state regulations are expressed in an emotive register, by conveying sensitivities. These encounters become affective concerns for field researchers as they work in an atmosphere of uncertainty. Researchers are afraid to step just a little too far over an imaginary red line, a boundary that is moving, roughly in relation to regional and international political tensions.

Doing fieldwork in this particular kind of atmosphere of uncertainty introduces an affective component to one's research, albeit one that is not openly discussed. There is a body of literature in feminist anthropology establishing the critical, even universal importance of affect and emotion in culture and society, including the emotive position of the field researchers themselves.<sup>4</sup> However, the affective experience of navigating interrogations by state surveillance officials, as described above, is far less frequently discussed, even though such encounters have the power to shape research development, activities, and findings, as I describe below. The absence of this topic in much of the literature is likely an extension of the fear and trepidation around losing access—or worse—when navigating ambiguous authoritative state practices between home and the field. For those with family ties in their country of research, this loss has additional personal implications, as the boundaries around home and research are not always clear.

In this auto-ethnographic essay, I explore how the political context between the US and Iran, and my apprehension around Iranian government "sensitivities", affected the development of my research. The authoritarian practices of both the Iranian and US governments provide numerous barriers to the cultivation of meaningful, long-term professional connections among researchers, activists, and cultural producers—the relationships most necessary to fostering greater understanding across fraught political borders.

### Navigating Research Development across Fraught Borders

Prior to my interrogation by Iranian surveillance officials, I had already become practiced at taking deep breaths during US Border and Customs Control interrogations, which use methods far more demanding and drawn out than my three-hour session with the unnamed Iranian officials. In the US, tea is not offered. On multiple occasions at US airport ports of entry, I have had my bags, laptop, and phone searched; missed layover flights (at personal expense); and, on one occasion, was invited to become an "informant" on Iran for the US government, a proposal framed in shockingly casual terms following hours of waiting, accusatory questioning, and riffling through my belongings.

Scholars of Iran, particularly dual nationals and those based in the United States, navigate taxing political tensions between the two governments. The Iranian government is notorious

<sup>4</sup> For instance, see Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986); Catherine Lutz and Geoffery M. White, "The Anthropology of Emotions," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 15 (1986): 405–36; Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, "Toward an Anthropology of Self and Feeling," in *Cultural Theory*, ed. Richard A. Shewder and Robert A. Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 137–156; and Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, *Knowledge and Passion: Ilongot Notions of Self and Social Life* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

for harassing and detaining dual citizens from the US, Canada, and the UK. The American government does the same, often worse, to Iranian nationals in the US, as surveillance activities are invested in collecting information on Iran's nuclear activities. Cases like that of Sirous Asgari, an Iranian materials scientist who was arrested and indicted in 2017 after declining to inform for the FBI, show that the ability to rebuff US informant activity is a privilege reserved for American passport holders.<sup>5</sup> Unsurprisingly, arrests of Iranians in the US receive far less coverage by American news outlets than arrests of Americans in Iran.

Numerous cases of writers, scholars, and journalists imprisoned in Iran have hovered over my fifteen years of training, fieldwork, and writing. I began my undergraduate degree in Middle Eastern Studies as dual-national scholars Ramin Jahanbegloo and Haleh Esfandiary were imprisoned and interrogated for their research and writing on Iran. The detention, advocacy, and eventual 2009 release of Iranian-American journalist Roxana Saberi was particularly memorable to me. When she visited UCSD to give a talk about her experience, I remember having mixed feelings. I felt horror and anger at her treatment in Iran's maximum security Evin prison, but also proud of her perseverance and an affinity for the series of choices that compelled this American-born woman to live and work in Iran, her father's homeland.

As an Iranian-American, the boundaries between professional development and personal exploration of one's own culture can sometimes blur. For example, when I enrolled in UCSD's Persian Language for Heritage Speakers courses, I learned to read and write in the language I grew up speaking with my mother's family. I learned that the long *alef* ("A") sound was audibly *kermanshahi* (from Kermanshah), a place that existed to me at the time only in the form of my grandmother's melodic Farsi. In some moments, I could feel my grandmother's yearning for this place become my own. This is an example of how my years of scholarly development at college recalled my formative years of human development at home: bringing a formal education to the first sounds and words I had ever heard, giving names and histories to the places from which my family migrated.

Many of us who pursue research in Iran do so from a place of both academic and personal importance. This duality leads to mixed feelings when making choices about whether and how to navigate these complex, fraught borders that both inspire and scare Americans doing research in Iran. The representation of risk for Americans traveling to Iran has often been oversized by mainstream news media and US State Department travel warnings. Misrepresentations of Iran were particularly poignant in the decades directly following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. This inspired a group of brave second-generation Iranian-Americans, just one or two cohorts ahead of my own, to carry out research, live, work, and write from Iran. Despite political tensions since the 1979 Revolution, numerous significant research projects based on long-term fieldwork have been conducted in Iran. These contributions shifted the focus away from the political spectacles of ayatollahs and mullahs, and instead shed light on the issues important to everyday Iranians.<sup>6</sup> While this work helped to balance alarmist, sometimes warmongering, political characterizations of Iran, cases like that of Saberi's arrest and attempted forced confession still make the fear of researching in Iran all too real.

A piece of this very real fear has hovered over each step of my own research development. As I began my preliminary fieldwork in Iran in the winter of 2015, Iranian-American journalist Jason Rezaian had been imprisoned for over a year. Before his arrest, Rezaian had been known as a balanced reporter for the *Washington Post*, one who critiqued economic sanctions and highlighted the Iranian leader's openness to diplomacy with the US.

<sup>5</sup> Laura Secor, "The Man Who Refused to Spy," *The New Yorker*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/09/21/the-man-who-refused-to-spy>.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, see Kevan Harris, *A Social Revolution: Politics and the Welfare State in Iran* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017); Pardis Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings: Iran's Sexual Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Shahram Khosravi, *Young and Defiant in Tehran* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Rose Wellman, *Feeding Iran: Shi'i Families and the Making of the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2021).

Rezaian's coverage of everyday life in Iran was meant to educate a misinformed American audience. If someone with such a moderate tone had become a target, I had to ask myself which research topics were apolitical enough and which groups of elites would have a say on the matter—groups whose alignments were difficult, sometimes even impossible, for me to make sense of. After Rezaian's release in January 2016, as I was preparing for long-term fieldwork, an international campaign was mounting for the release of Iranian-Canadian anthropologist Homa Hoodfar (released in September 2016). Lastly, during my fieldwork in Iran in 2017, the American PhD student Xinyue Wang was sentenced to ten years (later released in December 2019 in a prisoner exchange). These detentions were all based on charges of espionage.

Ethnographers doing research in Iran face various forms of surveillance and oversight via government interrogations of their research as well as from organized social groups, such as the *basij* (morality police), a paramilitary Islamist group connected to the government's surveillance community. In her book, Narges Bajoghli discusses how these different forms of governmental and societal surveillance guide our clothing choices, bodily comportment, and the ways we narrate our research and familial backgrounds when moving from one social context to another.<sup>7</sup> This can create a psychological challenge when undertaking fieldwork. To avoid being marked as a potential spy, our research activities must remain within an unmarked, liminal space of presenting depoliticized topics that will not be seen as *hasasi* (sensitive) or threatening to the state, while we must also remain forthcoming about our positionalities and research intentions.

### Fieldwork in a Surreal Time

During my dissertation fieldwork, my steps felt more uncertain than on previous trips, as it was a period of heightened volatility in Iranian-US relations. In 2017, my grandfather and I sat in his Tehran flat, watching the news in horror as Donald Trump took office, shredded the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JPOCA) agreement for nuclear non-proliferation, and invoked Executive Order 1376 “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry,” banning entry to foreign nationals from seven predominately Muslim countries, including Iran. Overnight, American visas and residency cards were withdrawn from Iranians, who were unable to return to their universities, work, and homes in the United States. One of my cousins, who was visiting her mother in Kermanshah after working her way through UK and Canadian universities to finally find a job and settle in Seattle, was unable to return to the US. I was tracking legal challenges to Order 1376 in the US courts, hoping Iranians like my cousin, caught in this policy chaos, could soon return to their homes. At the same time, I was also uncertain about how all this dizzying, Twitter-based policy change would impact my ability to remain in Iran. Immigration policies tend to be reciprocal, with the US setting the tone. I braced myself for Iran's expulsion of Americans holding Iranian visas.

However, in response to Trump's “Muslim ban,” Iran's foreign minister, Javad Zarif, announced: “Unlike the U.S., our laws are not retroactive. All with valid Iranian visas will be gladly welcomed.”<sup>8</sup> This policy affected me and a handful of other American passport holders in Iran on visas at the time. It was a surreal time to be an American in Iran. With such unprecedented political instability in the US, it felt important to tread lightly. Donald Trump had made it clear that he would not negotiate for American hostages, as Barack Obama had done during both of his presidential terms.

<sup>7</sup> Narges Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 15–20.

<sup>8</sup> Maher Chmaytelli and Lin Noueihed, “Global Backlash Grows against Trump's Immigration Order,” *Reuters*, January 30, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-immigration-reaction-idUSKBN15D0QM>



## How Surveillance Uncertainties Guide Research Development

My interrogation during my exploratory fieldwork in 2015 left an impression on my research choices. My interrogators had let me know that I was neither above nor below their measured data collection and dossier-keeping on foreign researchers. When I returned to Iran for a year of fieldwork in 2017, I assumed that all of my phone, Internet, and land line communications were being directly surveilled. I stored my fieldnotes on an external thumb drive and developed an apolitical lexicon for text messages and phone calls. With my interrogation in mind, I reserved topics like “gender,” “filmmaking,” and “feminism” for in-person conversations. That the government’s sensitivities centered on my core research and personal interests was sometimes maddening during my fieldwork. I felt both drawn to, and apprehensive about, crossing an imaginary line of conduct. I was compelled to go deeper while simultaneously farther away from subjects or spaces that could be threatening enough to instigate government scrutiny.

The memory of my first interrogation hovered over me, guiding some of my fieldwork choices around with whom and how I spent my time. This came up early at an NGO for displaced working youth in Tehran, when I was researching a local trend in films produced about displaced youth at NGO schools like this one. When I was asked to contribute to volunteer-based extra curricular programming, I agreed to develop an English-language speaking group followed by a participatory filmmaking program. After discussing the structure, time, days, and size of the speaking group with the NGO’s director, I was surprised when, on the first day of the speaking group, only myself and Mahmoud (a pseudonym), a Kurdish youth in his late teens, were present. Perplexed, I followed-up with the administrative staff, who made it clear that he was the only youth attending that day. The door was closed to prevent younger boisterous youth from walking in and out of the room and disrupting the lesson. While doors are usually shut when activities are in session, it felt uncomfortable in this instance with just the two of us in the room. As our conversation began, Mahmoud asked that we speak in Farsi instead of English. My planned drills took a back seat as he came out to me about feeling that he was a transgender person. Mahmoud recounted homophobic slurs, harassment, and assaults he experienced from people on the streets, as well fights with his older brother at home. He described how he knew a friend “like him” in Sweden, and he hoped to join him someday. At the end of our session, Mahmoud asked to exchange phone numbers in order to continue our conversation. I had to decline due to the NGO’s policy on volunteers and youth not exchanging numbers, a rule established for the safety of youth. However, even if this policy had not existed, I would not have wanted to establish a traceable connection to him, as such could have exposed his story to surveillance officers who may have been reading my correspondences at the time. I remembered my interrogation about whether I planned to make a film about transgender people. As I was, at the time, designing a film production program for youth at the same NGO, I worried that becoming close with Mahmoud would push my activities just a little too far over that invisible, malleable red line of disallowed subjects. Although Mahmoud was a vulnerable youth in need of more specialized support than he was getting, and although he was eager to share his story and connect with me, I found myself creating distance between us for both our sakes.

How this one-on-one conversation between Mahmoud and myself transpired could have been a coincidence, but I also wondered whether it had been consciously or subconsciously facilitated. Leading up to my volunteer activities, I had numerous casual conversations with the NGO leadership about gender, advocacy, and other so-called “feminist-y” issues. NGOs in Tehran are often led by middle-class cosmopolitan Iranian women, many of whom were educated in the West and embrace liberal feminist values.<sup>9</sup> I was also aware of situations in

<sup>9</sup> Fae Chubin, “Glocalizing Women’s Empowerment: Feminist Contestation and NGO Activism in Iran,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 49, no. 6 (2020): 715–44.

which marginalized youth in the Global South are already aware of the kinds of subjects and stories of interest to Western researchers.<sup>10</sup> In the years leading up to my fieldwork, in fact, there had been a proliferation of documentary and narrative films about transgender people in Iran.<sup>11</sup> This encounter could have, in part, been an effort by my colleagues to facilitate a connection between myself and a youth in need of additional support. It is possible that he saw me as someone he could potentially trust, coming from a country with a strong presence of communities that embrace transgender people. Or, it could all have been a coincidence.

Just when measures, like distancing queer youth, seemed overly cautious, my name started appearing on online propaganda news sites loosely affiliated with the Sepah (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps).<sup>12</sup> I had attended a country-wide NGO conference in Arak, an un-permitted event where NGO leaders met to coordinate their advocacy agendas. A theme of these online posts described my presence in Arak as “an American foreigner fomenting unrest in the Bahai religious community in Arak.”<sup>13</sup> The claims were obviously false: I had not left the conference premises during my visit to Arak, and up until that point I had never met an openly Bahai person in Iran. I had not even read articles about this community while in Iran—I nervously searched my computer’s browsing history to confirm this.

A few days later, one of the NGO’s directors called to let me know that local police had become sensitive to the fact that an American had attended the gathering. Her use of the word “sensitivities” stuck out to me. There are no laws or policies about Americans attending gatherings, and yet the police called the colleague who invited me to the event to express their “sensitivity” to my presence. In the absence of written laws, local police or government officials express “sensitivity” to elucidate and negotiate boundaries in flux. Writing about research methods in authoritarian contexts, scholars discuss the ways in which the relationships between government institutions and elite political groups may not always be apparent, and the potential impact of this on researchers.<sup>14</sup> After the 1979 Revolution, intra-elite conflict never transitioned into institutionalized governance in Iran; rather, the most powerful ideological paramilitary groups, the IRGC (Sepah), developed parallel welfare and defense institutions.<sup>15</sup> Encouraged to take part in business and the economy during Akbar Rafsanjani’s presidency (1989–1997), the IRGC’s influence eventually became visible in all areas of the Iranian state and society.<sup>16</sup> At this moment during my fieldwork, I felt unsure of the seriousness of local police “sensitivities” to my presence in Arak, and about the relation, if any, to Sepah websites’ perplexing fabrication of my fomenting activities. I again became cautious about who I interacted with and which gatherings I attended, lest I overstep a new boundary, of which I might be unaware.

My surprise only deepened when the following week I found myself unwittingly at a private Bahai ceremony. The friend-of-a-friend who had invited me explained, “I didn’t tell you it was a ceremony beforehand because the government reads our SMS messages,” as the Hidden Words holy book was passed around the circle and into my hands. I stepped aside to tell my friend that I felt nervous. I recounted Sepah’s false accusations of my provoking

<sup>10</sup> Pooja Rangan, *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Some of the films screened outside Iran were erroneously celebrated as progressive by Western audiences. In Iran, state-sponsored coverage of transgender surgeries is regarded as a cruel medicalization of and control over queer lives and bodies. See for example, Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> The Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Eslami (or Sepah) is an ideological paramilitary group also called the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Founded in 1979 by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Sepah is now one of the most powerful political and economic entities in Iran. Hesam Forozan, *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran: The Evolution and Roles of the Revolutionary Guards* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Bahais are the largest religious minority in Iran and are heavily persecuted by the government.

<sup>14</sup> Marlies Glasius, Meta de Lange, Jos Bartman, Emanuela Dalmasso, Aofei Lv, Adele Del Sordi, Marcus Michaelsen, and Kris Ruijgrok, *Research, Ethics and Risk in the Authoritarian Field* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2018), 41–42.

<sup>15</sup> Such as the Ministry of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces; Harris, *A Social Revolution*, 83–87.

<sup>16</sup> Forozan, *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran*.

unrest with Bahai in Arak the week prior. I will never forget how his expression changed from concern to deep laughter. “It’s alright, Sepah’s words are meaningless.” He began recounting the accusations Sepah had levied against him, and periods of time that his father had spent in prison.

The host of the ceremony joined our conversation, calmly recounting similar experiences of intimidation and harassment endured by people in his community. I understood that the severity of the instances they recounted was intended to help me see the hollowness of Sepah’s accusations, and that real intimidation came after significant, long-term resistance to the government, such as those of Bahai members. They meant to help me feel at ease, that nothing would come from just a couple trivial references to my name in a newspaper. However, among my uncertainties in navigating this fieldwork, it was fear that was my primary feeling in this sequence of events. This was another group of kind, artistic, social justice oriented young people that I found myself creating distance from out of an abundance of caution. As I continued to navigate ambiguous “sensitive” subjects in this mercurial state, my cautious nature guided the people, and ultimately the research subjects, I allowed myself to approach during fieldwork in Iran.

## Conclusion

When writing up my dissertation, I was wisely and kindly advised by a scholar of Iran to omit mention of the surveillance and interrogations I experienced in both the US and Iran. She was concerned that, if I chose to write candidly, I would not be able to return to Iran. The truth is that many of us who do ethnographic research in Iran navigate formal and informal surveillance practices. Although openly discussing these practices can pose further research challenges, some anthropologists working in Iran have analyzed the role of surveillance in their field research. In a rare piece of participant-observation research with Sepah, Narges Bajoghli describes being questioned and tested on multiple occasions in an informal capacity as “interrogative surveillance,” characterized by suspicion towards Western researchers.<sup>17</sup> Shervin Malekzadeh aptly describes the development of his research methods in Iran, including his presence during the 2009 Green Movement, as a series of field research visits that oscillated between boredom and panic.<sup>18</sup> Paola Rivetti and Shirin Saeidi argue that gendered barriers to long-term research in Iran have less to do with Islamic religious policy and more to do with the state’s authoritarian character.<sup>19</sup> In 2004, anthropologist Mary Elaine Hegland described the non-Iranian anthropologist’s challenge of obtaining long-term visas to adequately carry out research in Iran.<sup>20</sup> While not necessarily the focus of her article, the barriers she described revolve around the challenges of manoeuvring heavy bureaucracies in which policies for obtaining research visas are unpredictable and highly digressionary.

While these are critical and candid reflections on research methods in Iran, debates around research in authoritarian settings more broadly provide critical insight of the barriers, ethical concerns, and potential impacts on research findings. In rigid political environments, government officials can act as gatekeepers, making it difficult for researchers to access qualitative and quantitative data.<sup>21</sup> While researchers are less secure in these settings,

<sup>17</sup> Narges Bajoghli, “The Researcher as National Security Threat,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 39, no. 3 (2019): 451–61.

<sup>18</sup> Shervin Malekzadeh, “Paranoia and Perspective, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Start Loving Research in the Islamic Republic of Iran\*,” *Social Science Quarterly* 97, no. 4 (2016): 862–75.

<sup>19</sup> Paola Rivetti and Shirin Saeidi, “What Is So Special about Field Research in Iran?: Doing Fieldwork in Religiously Charged Authoritarian Settings,” in *Political Science Research in the Middle East and North Africa: Methodological and Ethical Challenges*, ed. Janine A. Clark and Francesco Cavatorta (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 35–45.

<sup>20</sup> Mary Elaine Hegland, “Zip In and Zip Out Fieldwork,” *Iranian Studies* 37, no. 4 (2004): 575–83.

<sup>21</sup> Saltanat Janenova, “The Boundaries of Research in an Authoritarian State,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 18 (2019): 1–8.



there are also heightened ethical and security concerns for research participants, who often lack the protections afforded to foreign nationals.<sup>22</sup> In the field of comparative politics, David Art analyzes a trend toward increased scholarly interest in authoritarian contexts alongside an omission of the barriers to carrying out in-depth qualitative research. He argues that these trends have had an enormous impact on the field, skewing data collection, political theory in the discipline, and US foreign policy.<sup>23</sup>

This scholarship speaks to the ways in which a forthcoming and rigorous analysis of our research development, even when circuitous, is what upholds the scientific character of ethnographic qualitative methods. My research was affected by uncertainty around allowable research subjects. My hope is that reflecting on some of these key moments demonstrates the ways in which certain research activities can be censored not through written policies or statements, but through creating a surveillance environment in which state “sensitivities” are ambiguous and fluid.

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<sup>22</sup> Natalie Koch, “Introduction – Field Methods in ‘Closed Contexts’: Undertaking Research in Authoritarian States and Places,” *Area* 45, no. 4 (2013): 390–95.

<sup>23</sup> David Art, “Archivists and Adventurers: Research Strategies for Authoritarian Regimes of the Past and Present\*,” *Social Science Quarterly* 97, no. 4 (2016): 974–90.

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