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## ABSTRACT

As modernity and traditionalism collide in contemporary Iran, an underground music scene is emerging in Iran's urban centers. Rap, rock, alternative and fusion musical styles are developing a position in Iranian musical culture. They have provided a means for many musicians to articulate a modern cultural identity that is rooted at home yet simultaneously in dialogue with a global community. Because of the Iranian government's religious scrutiny and state implemented censorship, many of these musicians are prohibited from producing albums or holding concerts. However, they continue to engage in their art and find creative ways around these restrictions through such means as distributing their music and videos over the Internet and playing secret concerts. Underground musicians are challenging the dominant discourse on questions of national identity and the meaning of being Iranian. While authorities continue with attempts to maintain an isolationist stance in regards to its national identity, the regime is facing an extremely young, educated nation, one with approximately seventy percent of its population under the age of thirty. An emerging youth culture is developing in Iran which identifies itself as cosmopolitan and internationalist, who are seeking to be a part of a global culture, or to become 'global' and whose voices of dissent are becoming increasingly more difficult to silence.

[http://depts.washington.edu/chid/intersections\\_Spring\\_2009/Heather\\_Rastovac\\_The\\_Underground\\_Music\\_Scene\\_in\\_Urban\\_Iran.pdf](http://depts.washington.edu/chid/intersections_Spring_2009/Heather_Rastovac_The_Underground_Music_Scene_in_Urban_Iran.pdf)

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# Contending with Censorship

## The Underground Music Scene in Urban Iran

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### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

As modernity and traditionalism collide in contemporary Iran, an underground music scene (*mūsīqī-i zīr-i zamīn*) is emerging in Iran's urban centers. Rap, rock, alternative and fusion musical styles are developing a position in Iranian musical culture. They have provided a means for many musicians to articulate a modern cultural identity that is rooted at home yet simultaneously in dialogue with a global community. One music video from Iran displays a young man with a shaved head and goatee singing lyrics of the fourteenth century Persian poet Hāfiz, accompanied by the sound of an electric guitar. Another video shows a Rap musician dressed in baggy pants and an oversized T-shirt reciting spoken word poetry and quoting the Qurān as he poetically critiques the Iranian government. These artists' music reflects their deep respect for Iran's cultural heritage and rich poetic traditions. At the same time, these musicians are often banned from distributing their music and music videos in their home country. Because of the Iranian government's religious scrutiny and state implemented censorship, many of these musicians are prohibited from producing albums or holding concerts. However, they continue to engage in their art and find creative ways around these restrictions through such means as distributing their music and videos over the Internet and playing secret concerts. Underground musicians are challenging the dominant discourse on questions of national identity and the meaning of being Iranian. The self-image that is reflected in their work is projected through sensibilities that can be

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<sup>1</sup> For this paper I use the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (IJMES) system of transliteration for Persian.

I would like to express profound gratitude to the University of Washington's Near Eastern Languages and Civilization department, and particularly to my advising professor, Firoozeh Papan-Matin. Professor Papan-Matin's love for scholarship in Persian studies and her endless support of my work has been an inspiration to me. I would also like to thank Professor Juliet McMains from the University of Washington's Dance department for all of her valuable feedback about my research and particularly for her insight into ethnographic methodology. Finally, I would like to thank the McNair Scholars program for the funding of this research and for all of their support in preparing for graduate studies, specifically Doctor Gene Kim and my graduate student advisor, Rocio Mendoza.

identified as secular and cosmopolitan and promotes democratic pluralism and youth consciousness.

#### Music in Iran Before the Islamic Revolution

Iran's strategic geographic position and the later discovery of oil has made the region an area of interest for Western countries specifically since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout the nineteenth century, Britain and Russia fought over control of Iranian territories. Foreign involvement continued well into the twentieth century and began to affect the political and economic arenas. It was at this time of the early twentieth century, and against this backdrop, that Rizā Shāh Pahlavī (1925-41), and later his son Muhammad Rizā Pahlavī (1941-79), engaged in intense efforts to modernize and Westernize the nation<sup>2</sup>. These efforts were supported by Western nations, which considered Iran a valuable resource in oil, as well as a potential policeman of the region. Particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, the push toward Westernization, industrialization, and the formation of an urban, secular state intensified, and issues of authentic development were suppressed in favor of a superficial imitation of the west.

The Pahlavī dynasty had little concern for how these modernization efforts were received and interpreted by the public. In fact, many government policies promoted the idea that these values were a detriment to Iran's development. These policies applied to both the politico-economic sphere, as well as the cultural domain. Broadcast media such as radio and television became powerful tools in the modernization project and beginning in the late 1950's, Muhammad Rizā Pahlavī initiated an expansion of broadcasting. Television particularly played a strong role, and imported television programs (many of which were American sitcoms and soap operas) were highly broadcast. The conception promoted by the Pahlavī dynasty that modernity and tradition were completely incompatible disregarded a fundamental issue in regards to Iran's future: "how to modernize and develop without losing important aspects of national and cultural identity."<sup>3</sup> Ayatullāh Khumeinī<sup>4</sup> had criticized these Westernization efforts even

<sup>2</sup> Rizā Shāh Pahlavī was an army general who led a coup d'état in 1921, became Prime Minister of Iran in 1923, and later became the Shāh of Iran in 1925, replacing the last of the Qājār monarchs. In 1941, the Allied Forces forced him to step down in favor of his son, Muhammad Rizā Pahlavī, who reigned until the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Laudan Nooshin, "Subversion and Countersubversion: Power, Control, and Meaning in the New Iranian Pop Music," in *Music, power, and politics*, ed. Annie J. Randall (New York, London: Routledge Press, 2005), 233.

before his exile from Iran in 1964 as he denounced the radio and television broadcasts for producing a “colonized youth.”<sup>5</sup> Nooshin refers to the 1970’s as an era of crisis in Iranian identity and many authors have written about the “intoxication” with the west that characterized the decade. This term is widely adopted after the famous essay *Gharbzādigī* (westoxification) written by Jalāl Al-i Ahmad<sup>6</sup> during the early 1950’s. It should be noted, however, that the concept of *gharbzādigī* originated even before Al-i Ahmad’s essay when relations with the west drew closer during the Qājār dynasty, which ruled Iran from 1794 to 1925.

In addition to the political and economic sphere, the “intoxication” with the west also affected all areas of musical culture in Iran. Following the Second World War, Western popular (pop) music arrived in Iran and became intricately linked to the Pahlavī monarchy’s efforts to Westernize the nation. As part of the Pahlavī dynasty’s modernization efforts, a wide range of popular Western music became available in Iran from the early 1960’s. Around the same time, Iranian pop music with singers promoted by the government-controlled broadcasting organization emerged.<sup>7</sup> The most well known singers of this Western-influenced pop music were Gūgūsh, Dariūsh and Ebī.<sup>8</sup> The Iranian popular music of this time came to signify the face of modern Iran in the 1960’s and 70’s. Due to its associations with Westernization and modernity, this pop music “came to occupy the fraught intersections between local and global, between quasi-colonial dependence and independence, between tradition and modernity, and between religious and secular.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, this music became part of polarized discourses that characterized the end of the Pahlavī monarchy and reflected anxieties about the loss of national identity (*bīthuwīyyatī*) and self-determination in the face of Western economic and cultural power. Mainly due to this complex

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<sup>4</sup> Ayatullāh Rūhollāh Musawī Khumeinī was the political leader of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, which was instrumental in the overthrow of Muhammad Rizā Pahlavī, the Shāh of Iran. Following the 1979 Revolution, Khumeinī became the country’s Supreme Leader until his death.

<sup>5</sup> Ameneh Youssefzadeh, “The Situation of Music in Iran since the Revolution: The Role of Official Organizations,” *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 9, no. 2 (2000): 37.

<sup>6</sup> Jalāl Al-i Ahmad was a prominent Iranian writer, thinker, and social/political critic. Al-i Ahmad is perhaps the most famous for coining the term *Gharbzādigī* (translated into English as “westernstruck” or “westoxification”) His book *Gharbzādigī: maqalah*, was clandestinely published in 1952 and criticized western imperialism. Al-i Ahmad’s message later became part of the ideology of the 1979 Islamic Cultural Revolution.

<sup>7</sup> Ameneh Youssefzadeh, “Singing in a Theocracy: Female Musicians in Iran,” in *Shoot the singer!: music censorship today*, ed. Marie Korpe (London: Zed Books, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> All three of these singers were unable to continue their careers in Iran after the Revolution and ultimately left Iran to pursue their careers in the West.

<sup>9</sup> Laudan Nooshin, “The Language of Rock: Iranian Youth, Popular Music, and National Identity,” in *Media, culture and society in Iran: living with globalization and the Islamic state*, ed. Mehdi Semanti (New York: Routledge, 2008), 69-70.

position, as well as its religiously contested status, pop music was officially banned following the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic form of government in Iran.

#### Music in Iran After the Islamic Revolution

The early 1970s in Iran marked an increasing resentment against decades of external political interference, lack of political freedoms, and the economic inequalities that contributed to the increasing gap between a new elite (consisting of those who benefited from oil wealth and who often adopted Western lifestyles) and the majority of Iran's population whose basic social needs remained unmet. This resentment combined with underlying social tensions and unrest eventually led to the overthrow of the Shāh in February 1979. This Islamic cultural revolution was anti-monarchical and through a complex course of events, it transformed Iran from a constitutional monarchy to a theocratic republic based on *Shar'īā* law.<sup>10</sup> The head of this state was the religious leader Ayatullāh Rūhullāh Khumeinī. The Revolution sought to cleanse the country of Western ideologies such as secularism and individualism in order to replace them with more traditional, Islamic values and to reassert a national identity after the perceived loss of identity under the rule of the Pahlavī monarchy.<sup>11</sup> With the involvement of a broad range of political and religious organizations, "the Revolution might be regarded as one of the earliest expressions of local resistance against the increasingly global nature of Western cultural, political, and economic hegemony."<sup>12</sup>

The post-Revolution government developed policies that placed various cultural activities within an Islamic framework. Ayatullāh Khumeinī proclaimed, "the road to reform in a country goes through its culture, so one has to start with cultural reform."<sup>13</sup> Looking to assert control though endorsing Islamic values, the theocracy began to pass legislations that confined or eliminated a wide range of cultural activities, with music being one of the most significant. The arts in general "were forced into an ideological straightjacket, codified by the Islamic

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<sup>10</sup> *Shar'īā* (which translates as "way") is the body of Islamic religious law and the legal framework within which the public and private aspects of life are regulated for those living in a legal system based on Islamic principles of jurisprudence.

<sup>11</sup> *Article 19*, "Unveiled: Art and Censorship in Iran," September 2006, 6. <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/iran-art-censorship.pdf> (accessed January 14, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Nooshin, "Subversion and Countersubversion", 235.

<sup>13</sup> Youssefzadeh, "The Situation of Music in Iran since the Revolution", 37.

principles of *halāl* (allowed in Islam) and *harām* (forbidden in Islam).<sup>14</sup> Since the beginning of the Islamic Revolution, music in particular has been problematic for the Islamic regime and has continued to be the subject of intense political and religious debate. Music's legal and social status continuously changes and is affected by the power play between various religious and political authorities, as is all aspects of life in Iran.

The Qurān does not explicitly condemn music. Yet, in Islamic ideology, music remains “the object of various restrictions and threats because of its alleged powers of seduction and corruption.”<sup>15</sup> Although all Muslim countries contain musical traditions, music's status within Islam has been highly ambiguous and Islamic theology approaches music with a certain amount of mistrust, suspecting it of containing powers liable to drive individuals to immoral acts.<sup>16</sup> According to a *hadīth* (tradition of the Prophet Muhammad) concerning Imām Sādiq (the sixth Imām of the Shī'ites), “Listening to music leads to discord (*nifāq*), just as water leads to the growth of vegetation.”<sup>17</sup>

Formulating cultural reform policies based within an Islamic framework has proved difficult for the post-revolutionary government because many Iranians contend with a religious identity, on the one hand, and a national identity, on the other. Though Iran has been a Muslim country since the seventh century C.E., with Islam playing a very important role in Iranian culture and society, many Iranians identify with a much older national identity that existed at least a thousand years before Islam. Nooshin suggests, “The profound contradictions in cultural policy during the 1980s were partly the result of a government trying to impose a hegemonic Islamic identity on a people intensely aware of, and unwilling to forfeit, their pre-Islamic heritage.” In this discussion, music and poetry hold a central position. They are often credited with maintaining this national identity throughout centuries of numerous invasions.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the fact that music has long played a central role in Iranian national identity, music's status in contemporary Iran has remained contentious. Ayatullāh Khumeinī announced:

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<sup>14</sup> Article 19, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Youssefzadeh, “The Situation of Music in Iran since the Revolution”, 35.

<sup>16</sup> See Youssefzadeh, “Singing in a Theocracy”; Article 19.

<sup>17</sup> Youssefzadeh, “The Situation of Music in Iran since the Revolution”, 40. Youssefzadeh cites Ayatullāh Muravviji, *Mūsīqī wa ghanā dar aineh-yi fiqh: Lectures on Shī'a Jurisprudence by Ayatullāh Muravviji* (Tehran: Pāzhūhishgāh-i farhang wa hunar-i eslāmī, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> Nooshin, “Subversion and Countersubversion”, 236.

... music is like a drug, whoever acquires the habit can no longer devote himself to important activities. It changes people to the point of yielding people to vice or to preoccupations pertaining to the world of music alone. We must eliminate music because it means betraying our country and our youth. We must completely eliminate it.<sup>19</sup>

Directly after the Revolution, many types of musical activities were banned, such as public concerts, music classes, solo female singing, and particularly radio and television broadcasts of Western and Iranian classical and pop music. Indeed the targeting of pop music had much to do with its associations with the Pahlavī dynasty's modernizing efforts. However, it was also due to its associations with dance movements and improper song lyrics, both of which the government considered incompatible with Islamic values and consisting of the potential to corrupt the nation's young people. Pop music was thus considered *mūsīqī-i mubtazal* ("cheap" or "decadent" music).<sup>20</sup> Ayatullāh Azarī Qumī articulates this sentiment, "Dance music is illicit; music accompanying vulgar (*mubtazal*) and useless (*bātil*) poems is illicit..."<sup>21</sup> Even the non-Iranian musicians of the Persian classical genre express views rooted in ideologies privileging 'high art' music over 'low art' music in Iran. French musician Jean During, referring to Persian classical music, argues, "Even the revolution and Islamization, in the end, worked out to the clear advantage of the great music,<sup>22</sup> if only by eliminating certain rival forms like *mutribī*, the traditional entertainment genre deemed vulgar."<sup>23</sup> Pop music was association with the pre-Revolution era, deemed un-Islamic and Western. It was ultimately banned after 1979.

The ban on pop music consequently imbued this musical genre with an immense subversive power, and for young people in Iran listening to pop music became a form of resistance against the Islamic regime. Throughout the 1980s, audiocassettes of pop music mainly produced by Iranian musicians and singers living in exile, particularly "Tehrangeles,"<sup>24</sup> (which is called *lusangilisi*) and other genres of Western music circulated the black market in Iran. Getting caught with these cassette tapes could cost individuals considerable fines and put them at risk of being jailed. Revolutionary guards (*pāsdārān*) frequently stopped cars in traffic searching for pop music cassettes and regularly raided homes if they

<sup>19</sup> Youssefzadeh, "The Situation of Music in Iran since the Revolution", 38.

<sup>20</sup> Nooshin, "Subversion and Countersubversion", 238.

<sup>21</sup> Youssefzadeh, "The Situation of Music in Iran since the Revolution", 41. Youssefzadeh cites "Bahsī fiqhī pīramūn-i mūsīqī," *Daily Risalat*, May 1991.

<sup>22</sup> Referring to Persian classical music.

<sup>23</sup> Jean During, "Third Millenium Tehran: Music!" *Iranian Studies* 38, no. 3 (2005): 376.

<sup>24</sup> "Tehrangeles" derives from the combination of "Tehran" and "Los Angeles" and refers to the Iranian diaspora community that resides in Los Angeles.

suspected a party was being held. Despite the extreme measures designed to eradicate music, the government was not successful in eliminating it from Iranian society completely, particularly since there is quite frequently a discrepancy between what laws are enforced in Iran and what people actually do in private.<sup>25</sup> Even if young people agreed with the meanings authorities assigned to pop music (for example, as a symbol of Western decadence, etc), “such meanings were simply unable to compete with the quite different meanings many young people in particular assigned to this music: pop as a symbol of social freedoms, of defiance, of youth, and of the outside world.”<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, “the very intention of abolishing music in public life unexpectedly led to increasing practices of music... by the younger generation of all social classes.”<sup>27</sup> Considered another form of resistance and way of maintaining identity at this time, unprecedented numbers of people began learning traditional Iranian music, which experienced a sort of a revival after the Revolution, and concerts and private lessons in homes became common.<sup>28</sup>

The late 1980s and the 1990s showed subtle changes in the cultural domain for the first time since the Revolution, albeit limited ones. After the end of the Iran-Iraq war (1988) and the death of Ayatullāh Khumeinī (1989), institutions, especially those dealing with culture, began to exhibit signs of relaxation on restrictions. Shortly before his death, Ayatullāh Khumeinī issued a *fatwa*<sup>29</sup> authorizing the sale and purchase of musical instruments, as long as these instruments served a licit purpose.<sup>30</sup> Certain concerts were gradually granted authorization, though many restrictions still applied, such as the prohibition of dance rhythms and women’s solo voices.<sup>31</sup> The relaxation of policies regarding the cultural sphere following the end of the war has led some scholars to believe that “the repression of music in the Islamic Republic appears to have been more of a period of austerity consequential to the revolution and to the war than an implementation of religious law.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See Nooshin, “Subversion and Countersubversion”, and Youssefzadeh, “Singing in a Theocracy”.

<sup>26</sup> Nooshin, “Subversion and Countersubversion”, 243.

<sup>27</sup> Youssefzadeh, “The Situation of Music in Iran since the Revolution”, 38.

<sup>28</sup> Nooshin, “Subversion and Countersubversion”, 241.

<sup>29</sup> A *fatwa* is a religious decree determining the licit or non-licit character of an act.

<sup>30</sup> Youssefzadeh “The Situation of Music in Iran since the Revolution”, 39. Youssefzadeh draws from a quote of Khumeinī from an interview he did in the daily newspaper *Keyhān Journal* in 1989.

<sup>31</sup> Female voices were permitted only as part of a choir. See Wendy S. DeBano, “Enveloping Music in Gender, Nation, and Islam: Women’s Music Festivals in Post-revolutionary Iran,” *Iranian Studies*, no. 38 (2005): 441 – 462; During, “Third Millenium Tehran: Music!”; Nooshin, “Subversion and Countersubversion”; and Youssefzadeh, “Singing in a Theocracy”.

<sup>32</sup> During, 376.

Realizing the extent to which the nation was weary of this austerity, newly elected President Hāshimī Rafsanjānī<sup>33</sup> worked toward social reform and promoted a more open political, social and cultural atmosphere. However, religious authorities' rhetoric against Western cultural imperialism (*tahājum-i farhangī*) continued to flourish as it had since the beginning of the Revolution. In light of this ideology, traditional Iranian music gradually gained a certain amount of legitimacy, and production and distribution of this musical genre was permitted. Traditional forms of Iranian music alone, however, still could not meet the demands of many of Iran's young people.

#### The Cultural Thaw and the Legalization of Pop Music

Pop music remained banned until Iran's period of cultural thaw following the 1997 election of reformist President Muhammad Khātāmī. Khātāmī initiated a number of reforms in which the most significant had been in the cultural domain<sup>34</sup>. Ayatullāh Muhājirānī, the head of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, also played an important role in the new atmosphere of openness that characterized this time. Books, newspapers, and journal publications expressing a variety of views flourished. Music also benefited from the lifting of many official restrictions, and there was an increase in public concerts, music education<sup>35</sup> and music publications<sup>36</sup>, as well as an emerging market for cassettes and CDs.<sup>37</sup> Radio and television stations began to broadcast more styles of music than the war hymns and religious music that had dominated the airwaves since 1979.

One particular musical genre that emerged on the airwaves of *Sidā wa Sīmā*<sup>38</sup> shortly after the election of Khātāmī was a new style of Iranian pop referred to as *pop-i jadīd* ("new pop"). This music shared many stylistic and formulaic traits with the Iranian pop still officially illegal, such as sentimental love poetry, the focus on a solo singer, and instrumentation that included mainly Western instruments.

<sup>33</sup> Rafsanjānī served as president after Khomeinī's death in 1989 until the election of Muhammad Khātāmī in 1997.

<sup>34</sup> Before his presidency, Khātāmī also served as the head of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, one of the main governmental bodies dealing with music in Iran.

<sup>35</sup> The municipal authority of Tehran established eight cultural centers (*farhangsara*) that promoted concerts and music lessons. The Music Department at the University of Tehran also reopened.

<sup>36</sup> Some examples are *Hunar-i Mūsīqī* ("The Art of Music"), *Falsnāmih-yi Mūsīqī -i Mahūr* ("Mahūr Musical Quarterly"), and *Falsnāmih-yi Mūsīqī -i Maqām*.

<sup>37</sup> Nooshin, "Subversion and Countersubversion".

<sup>38</sup> The government controlled national radio and television organization, which is placed under the direct aegis of the Guide (*rahbar*) of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatullāh Khāmene'i.

Some main differences, however, were the lyrics (which were replaced with more ‘decent’ lyrics), the absence of female vocalists, and a more moderate, less suggestive tempo. During calls this new Iranian pop, “officially baptized music for the young,”<sup>39</sup> as it is apparent authorities were attempting to attract the younger generations to this new, authorized music and, according to Basminjī, away from “dangerous political ideas”.<sup>40</sup> Though there wasn’t a complete decline in the popularity of *lusanqilesī* pop, *pop-i jadīd* gained significant popularity among young people in the beginning, particular since the music’s lyrics proved more relevant to lived experiences in Iran in comparison to imported pop from Tehrangeles.<sup>41</sup> According to Basminjī, “this trend was so successful that video and audiocassettes imported from LA experienced a 30 percent drop in sales and over 55 percent of people turned to domestically produced pop music.”<sup>42</sup>

Though the sanctioning of the new pop music is considered an attempt at liberalization, the government had also very strategically decreased the subversive power of imported pop. Perhaps the Iranian government realized that cultural imperialism was becoming more and more difficult to combat, particularly with the increase in global communications such as the Internet. Not being able to prevent young people from listening to imported pop, the government made efforts of bringing it under their own control by “creating a local alternative,” in order to “attract audiences away from other kinds of pop music and thereby reestablish control over areas that it had relinquished in 1980s and early 1990s: pop music as entertainment, as commodity, and as social behavior.”<sup>43</sup> Pop music’s meaning thus changed from one of resistance to a musical genre rendered domestic and safe.

#### Official Organizations Governing Music in Iran

**D**espite the increasing openness in the political and cultural spheres in Iran over the past decade, the conservative clerical lobby continues to challenge many of these changes. Music, particularly many styles of popular music, remains problematic for the government. Music is often caught within the power play between conservatives and reformists, both of whom are often deeply divided on the issue. Furthermore, three of the main governmental

<sup>39</sup> During, 382.

<sup>40</sup> Kaveh Basmenji, *Tehran Blues: how Iranian youth rebelled against Iran's founding fathers*, Youth culture in Iran (London: Saqi Books, 2005), 57.

<sup>41</sup> Nooshin, “Subversion and Countersubversion”.

<sup>42</sup> Basmenji, 57.

<sup>43</sup> Nooshin, “Subversion and Countersubversion”, 250-51.

branches responsible for music in Iran – the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (*Vizārat-i Farhang wa Irshād-i Islāmī*, or most often referred to as *Irshād*), *Sidā wa Sīmā*, and Arts Foundation (*Huwzih-yi Hunarī*) – are partly in competition with each other and often use music to serve particular political agendas.<sup>44</sup> Many of the restrictions established in the 1980s remain intact today: women are still restricted from performing as soloists, dancing or suggestive movement remains strictly forbidden in public, concerts or in music videos, musical instruments are not shown on television, and only religious music is allowed in public places on religious holidays.

Of the organizations dealing with culture in Iran, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (*Irshād*) plays the most significant role in implementing policies regarding music. *Irshād* consists of an “elaborate system of councils that regulate and monitor every sphere of artistic expression.”<sup>45</sup> Based upon Youssefzadeh’s extensive study of official organizations governing music in Iran, the Ministry’s functions in regards to music and musicians are: protection and support (*himāyat*), guidance and orientation (*hidāyat*), and supervision and control (*nizārat*).

*Protection and support (himāyat)*. This function is meant to provide musicians with official affiliation in the form of a card. According to Youssefzadeh, this affiliation has only provided an official recognition of musicians and has done little to provide musicians with salaries and benefits, with the exception of a few old masters of music in various regions of Iran.<sup>46</sup>

*Guidance and orientation (hidāyat)*. This function of *Irshād* claims to guide musicians in preserving the authenticity (*isālat*) of Iranian cultural music.

*Supervision and control (nizārat)*. Controlling all marketed sound productions is one of the major responsibilities of this organization. According to Youssefzadeh’s interview with Morādkhānī, a former minister of culture, this function aims to preserve the authentic (*asīl*) and traditional (*qadīmī*) culture of Iran.<sup>47</sup> This is done through such measures as issuing permits (*mujāwwiz*) for the distribution of recorded music, as well as issuing the permits needed for teaching

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<sup>44</sup> Lauden Nooshin, “Underground, Overground: Rock Music and Youth Discourses in Iran,” *Iranian Studies* 38, no. 3 (2005): 462–94.

<sup>45</sup> *Article* 19, 7.

<sup>46</sup> Youssefzadeh, “The Situation of Music in Iran since the Revolution”, 43.

<sup>47</sup> Ameneh Youssefzadeh, “Iran’s regional musical traditions in the twentieth century: A historical overview,” *Iranian Studies* 38, no. 3 (2005): 435.

music. All concerts must be granted authorization as well, unless the purpose of the concert is that of research (*pāzhūhishī*) or scholarship (*'ilmi*).

The system for the control of sound recordings is complex, often ambiguous, and consists of a classification system that codes each recording with a letter and a number. The purpose of this classification system is that *Irshād* wants to ensure buyers are aware of the genre and quality of the music they are purchasing. The letter classifies the genre of the music:

S	<i>sunnatī</i> (traditional)
N	<i>nawāhī</i> (regional)
A	<i>āmūzishī</i> (educational)
T	<i>taghyīr kardi</i> (modified)
J	<i>jadīd</i> (new)
M	<i>millal</i> (nations); various Muslim world music
K	<i>kilāsīk-i gharb</i> (classical Western music)
P	<i>pop</i>

Each recording is assigned a number from 1–4 (1 being the highest) in order to rank the quality (*keyfīyyat*) of the product's recording, presentation, etc. The responsibility of this classification is that of the Council of Evaluation of Music (*Shurā-yi karshināsī-i mūsīqī*) which consists of five elected professional musicians, who have historically tended to be musicians of the Persian classical music genre, naturally leading toward a bias of this genre.

In Iran, there is also a Council for the authorization of poems (*shurā-yi mujāvviz-i she'r*). The poems that musicians intend to use on recordings or in concerts must be submitted to the Council, where the words are subjected to strict scrutiny. The majority of musicians of all genres seeking to gain authorization will choose poems consisting of religious or mystical character (*'irfānī*), since many love songs and “poems of despair (*nāumīd kunandi*)” are deemed unacceptable.<sup>48</sup> (Youssefzadeh, 2000, 47)

New and more liberal policies were initiated under the direction of Ayatullāh Muhājirānī during Khātāmī's presidency, which reflected the leaders' preoccupations with handling a nation with such a young majority. In Youssefzadeh's interview with Muhājirānī in February 2000, he expresses his views on pop music:

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<sup>48</sup> Youssefzadeh, “The Situation of Music in Iran since the Revolution”, 47.

This kind of music nowadays exists in Iran. It caters to the needs of the young people, but does not require our financial or economic aid (*himāyat*). We have to let it exist, while at the same time preventing it from becoming too repetitive. Some people indeed believe that the repetition of tunes is liable to discourage the young and plunge them into a melancholy mood. That is why we have to watch this production. As for what people do in private, we are not responsible for it; it's for them to decide what they want to hear.<sup>49</sup>

Despite these more liberal policies and perspectives, a keen awareness of music's power has remained, and authorities have not ceased exerting strict control over this domain. This is demonstrated through the Ministry's complicated process required in order for musicians to secure *mujāwwiz* to produce, perform or teach music. According to Khushrū, the former Assistant Director of Arts at the *Irshād*:

Music exercises an undeniable influence on people. It can provide the deepest emotions and, as a result, strengthen each person's moral beliefs. But by its very power, it can also become dangerous and exercise an evil influence by changing its original nature. So among all forms, music is the one to which most attention must be paid and which has to be most closely watched and controlled.<sup>50</sup>

Since the 2005 election of Mahmūd Ahmadīnjād the issue of music has grown contentious once again. Ahmadīnjād has purged the government ministries of reform-minded officials, replacing them with former military commanders and religious hardliners.<sup>51</sup> The Supreme Cultural Revolutionary Council announced a ban on Western music in December 2005, stating, "Blocking indecent and Western music from the Islamic Republic of Iran is required."<sup>52</sup> The newest Minister of Culture, Muhammad Hussein Saffār Harandī, a former deputy commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, has reportedly negative views on music and plans to "combat music that is against the values of the Republic of Iran."<sup>53</sup> As the ban on music in the 1980s has shown, however, the control exercised by state organizations cannot stop the existence of a very active

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>51</sup> Alī Akbar Dareinī, "Can't Stop the Music, Say Young Iranians After the Ban," *The Washington Post*, December 26, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/12/25/AR2005122500690.html> (accessed April 29, 2008).

<sup>52</sup> *BBC News*, "Iran President Bans Western Music," [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4543720.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4543720.stm) (accessed January 15, 2008). See also *Article 19*. This ban also prohibits *mūsīqī-i assīl* from being broadcast on national radio as well.

<sup>53</sup> *Freemuse; Freedom of Musical Expression*, "Gradual Changes Through Modern Technology," <http://freemuse.org/sw20741.asp> (accessed April 25, 2008).

and organized black market in which people have access to banned items. As one young Iranian articulates, “Mr. Ahmadīnjād maybe doesn't know his society well enough... especially among the youth... we can still get the music we would like to listen from somewhere else. We can get it from the Internet, we can get it on Tehran's big black market, anywhere.”<sup>54</sup>

#### The Emergence of the Underground Music Scene: Rock, Rap, and Alternative Music Styles

The genres of music in Iran that for the last decade continue to be most targeted by authorities are those that comprise Iran's underground music (*mūsīqī-i zīr-i zamīn*) scene – rock, rap, and alternative music (*mūsīqī-i alternative*) styles. This music scene emerged in Iran's urban centers shortly after the sanctioning of pop music during the cultural thaw of the late 1990s. Nooshin believes that the legalization of domesticated pop music was consequently one inadvertent catalyst for the development of this unregulated, grass roots underground music scene as the new subversive musical genre. As pop resigned its peripheral position as the primary ‘other’ in Iranian music, musical genres in the underground scene stepped up to take its place in order to express an alternative musical space and identity. This new popular music has emerged in a nation where, “popular music has, with few exceptions, tended to come from the “center” (of power) or from outside the country.”<sup>55</sup>

Genres of rock, rap, and alternative music are relegated to “underground” status since few musicians who perform these genres of music in Iran have managed to gain authorization (*mujāwwiz*) from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in order to produce albums or perform concerts in the public domain.<sup>56</sup> Despite President Ahmadīnjād's recent ban prohibiting Western music from being broadcast on state-controlled radio and television stations, there is not a specific law against rock or rap music particularly. However, the challenges of obtaining *mujāwwiz* have kept underground musicians struggling to establish themselves in the public sphere.

To clarify terminology: Since the arrival of all genres of Western and Westernized music in Iran, Iranians have utilized the term “pop” in order to describe all Western genres of music. Since the post-1997 legalization,

<sup>54</sup> Dareini, “Can't Stop the Music”.

<sup>55</sup> Nooshin, “The Language of Rock”, 70.

<sup>56</sup> Nooshin suggests that the connotation of the term “underground” also partly stems from the fact that these bands, out of necessity, have literally had to rehearse in the privacy of basements (*zīr-i zamīn*).

however, the meanings of certain terminology have shifted slightly and people now tend to refer to “pop” when speaking of legal, largely mainstream music, and refer to “rock” when speaking of music which is generally unauthorized and outside of the mainstream. The term “rock” is a term often used as an umbrella term, both generically as a synonym for “underground” or “alternative” music, as well as for specifically referring to the particular musical genre. Nooshin also contends that underground musicians consciously choose “rock” to describe the underground scene because of and identification with rock music’s anti-establishment ethos, making the usage of the term both convenient and symbolic. When this music movement was just beginning to emerge, many of the musicians utilized and identified with the term “underground music.” For bands seeking to a gain authorization to produce albums or play concerts from *Irshād*, however, this term became problematic since it “suggested an up-front oppositional stance rarely found in this music, which tends instead to follow the centuries-old Iranian tradition in which social commentary is subtly veiled.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, many musicians have begun to adopt the more neutral terms “alternative” and/or “rock” to describe the scene. Nooshin explains, however, “Now, as the movement has expanded and matured, individual styles (such as metal, hip-hop, and so on) are gaining enough of a separate identity not to need the overarching labels which in the early days helped the fledgling movement develop a coherent identity.”<sup>58</sup>

With so few local role models until recently, many Iranian rock and rap musicians have tended to look outside of Iran and draw on predominately Western musical models. Many musicians experiment with a variety of musical styles such as blues, jazz, flamenco, among many other Western styles, as well as localized sounds – predominantly Persian lyrics, vocal styles, modal and rhythmic structures, traditional instruments, and even the poetry of medieval Persian mystic poets like Rūmī and Hāfiz. Despite drawing from Western music models, much of the music being made by underground musicians goes beyond mere imitation. Nooshin contends that, “While the West still holds a powerful fascination for many people, what is interesting is the way in which bands are transcending what might be regarded as the “aping of one’s former colonial masters” and developing a new sound”.<sup>59</sup>

As the underground music scene is predominantly an urban, cosmopolitan, middle class phenomenon, many of the underground musicians are highly articulate university students or university graduates (though seldom music

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<sup>57</sup> Nooshin, “Underground, Overground”, 476.

<sup>58</sup> Nooshin, “The Language of Rock”, 71.

<sup>59</sup> Nooshin, “Subversion and Countersubversion”, 261-62.

graduates). Because of the lack of live performance contexts, it is difficult to determine who are the audiences of underground music. Yet based upon online websites and blogs about the scene, as well as evidence presented by Nooshin, it appears that underground music in Iran appeals to the peers of the musicians themselves: young, urban, educated, relatively affluent, cosmopolitan, “as well as modernist, internationalist, and secular in outlook, lifestyle, and aspiration.”<sup>60</sup>

The emergence of the underground music scene marks the first time that Iranian youth are actively creating grassroots music in which they are finding and expressing in their own voices in addressing social issues in an indirect statement of resistance. The illegally imported pop music of the 1980s was a symbol of resistance, but it was resistance by consumption rather than through creation, since “all of the pop music available either dated from before 1979 or was created outside of Iran in very different social and cultural contexts.”<sup>61</sup> The contemporary underground music scene, on the other hand, consists of young people actively engaged in a musical movement that, for its participants, represents youth, freedom of expression, and being anti-establishment. Unlike *mūsīqī-e assīl*, which is associated more with older generations, underground musical genres provide an opportunity for young people to feel a sense of ownership, that it belongs specifically to them and reflects their experience. Furthermore, much of the underground music scene is challenging some of the long accepted norms of Iranian popular music in general through emphasizing a “strong collaborative ethos, stylistic eclecticism, meaningful lyrics, and an increasing role for women musicians.”<sup>62</sup>

In regards to the lyrics utilized by underground musicians, there are some distinctions between the expression of Iranian rock musicians and Iranian rap artists. While both genres articulate commentary on a range of social and personal issues, Iranian rock music lyrics tend to be less candid than rap lyrics. Rock lyrics can be considered “rebellious rather than directly political,” offering an often “intensely personal alternative to the clichéd nostalgia of mainstream pop, simultaneously invoking an alternative space of youth experience and an

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<sup>60</sup> Nooshin, “The Language of Rock”, 74.

<sup>61</sup> Nooshin, “Subversion and Countersubversion”, 244. The only active creation of music that symbolized resistance against the restrictions imposed onto music at this time was via *mūsīqī-e assīl*.

<sup>62</sup> Nooshin, “Underground, Overground”, 467. While this paper does not focus on gender, it is important to note that the inclusion of women in the underground music scene portrays its progressive and anti-establishment ethos. According to DeBano, “For many Iranian women, the pursuit of a career in music can be a risky endeavor due to gender norms, the stigma attached to professional musicians, concern about extra-musical associations (like dancing, drinking, and the like), and finally, fear of music’s power to elicit carnal responses.” (457)

oblique challenge to the status quo.”<sup>63</sup> Rap music, on the other hand, is considered more progressive in terms of expression. Speaking about rap artists in Iran Nassir Mashkouri, the editor of *Zirzamīn*, an online underground music magazine,<sup>64</sup> claims, “The words that they speak are very radical. They speak of taboos such as sex and drugs ... they are much more rebellious than those involved in rock music.”<sup>65</sup> One song by the female rap artist *Persian Princess* shows evidence of this outspokenness, which was written about the eighteen year-old girl Nāzanīn, who was sentenced to death in January 2006 for murdering one of three men who attempted to rape her and her sixteen year-old cousin. Addressing taboo topics such as these are considered extremely radical, particularly if they are critical of the state. However, Nooshin argues that song lyrics of underground musicians need not be overtly radical in order for these musicians’ work to be contentious. Because “official discourses problematized Western-style popular music and branded it as a symbol of Western decadence, ... the musical language of rock continues to embody an oppositional quality precisely because of where official discourses have placed it, even when song lyrics are apparently innocuous.”<sup>66</sup>

Choosing to use lyrics that would be considered overtly radical in the context of Iran, however, essentially means making a conscious decision to remain an underground musician; lyrics are one of the first things *Irshād* scrutinizes when distributing *mujāwwiz*. Staying “underground” versus attempting to come “overground” (*rū-yi zamīn*) is ultimately a complicated, paradoxical position that these musicians face. To a certain degree, underground musicians benefit from their underground status since their marginalization imbues them with similar power that illegally imported pop had in the 1980s. While being granted full legalization in the same way that pop had would bring certain advantages to musicians in the underground scene, it could potentially result in a loss of the subversive power gained by their peripheral status. Furthermore, remaining “underground” affords these musicians with a certain amount of control over their music, granting them the ability to express perhaps taboo views and providing them with a certain amount of artistic satisfaction. One Iranian rap artist by the name of AZ exclaims, “Maybe it’s good that the best music is all underground. It keeps us on the edge. It keeps us fresh.”<sup>67</sup>

On the other hand, many musicians express concern over a range of issues both

<sup>63</sup> Nooshin, “Underground, Overground”, 488.

<sup>64</sup> See *Zirzamin; Iranian Alternative Music Magazine*, <http://www.zirzamin.se/>.

<sup>65</sup> *Article 19*, 43-44.

<sup>66</sup> Nooshin, “Underground, Overground”, 488.

<sup>67</sup> *Article 19*, 44.

practical and financial. They face problems in obtaining rehearsal spaces and affordable instruments, gaining access to recording equipment or studios, and then, of course, with acquiring the *mujāwwiz* necessary to reach audiences and secure a place in the public domain. As AZ articulates, “You can’t make a career at music in Iran unless you are willing to compromise.”<sup>68</sup> Ultimately coming overground would be a trade-off: giving up control over one’s music versus the advantages gained through official and social acceptance.

#### Contending with Censorship in Iran

Censorship has been implemented in Iran over the past century in order to legitimize governing authorities and their attempts to modify the cultural, social, and economic environments of the nation. During the Pahlavī monarchy (particularly during Muhammad Rizā Shāh’s reign), censorship worked to delegitimize all things considered a threat to security, law and order, and the idea of the monarchy. Since the 1979 Revolution, the Islamic Republic has utilized censorship practices in attempts of ‘cleansing’ the nation of Western cultural onslaught with the intention of creating an ideal Islamic society.<sup>69</sup>

Censorship in Iran is officially implemented through state organizations and institutions that enforce laws, regulations, and guidelines that restrict many forms of expression. There is often little certainty as to the governing norms since laws are enforced selectively and inconsistently. There are a variety of ways that censorship is implemented in Iran. They vary from official banning to imprisonment, yet most efforts at control are more subtle and indirect. Governmental organizations “unofficially” provide “suggestions,” “advice,” and/or “guidance,” and create complicated processes for obtaining authorization (*mujāwwiz*), as is the case with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Authorization can take weeks, months, years, or be denied altogether. The Ministry employs strict scrutiny when examining applications for *mujāwwiz*, and artists are informed of any amendments needed to deem the work acceptable for approval (in line with the tenets of Islam).<sup>70</sup> The process every artist must go through in order to gain official permission to produce art naturally results in a degree of self-censorship, a power not to be underestimated. Furthermore, the

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> See Abel Kerevel, *Censorship and legitimacy in Iran: modernity, governance, and the public sphere*, Thesis, M.A. (Seattle, WA: University of Washington, 2007).

<sup>70</sup> See Human Rights Watch, *Guardians of thought: limits on freedom of expression in Iran*, Middle East Watch report (New York: Middle East Watch, 1993).

continuous flux in Iran's political climate and the often-ambiguous guidelines for obtaining *mujāwwiz* creates an environment of anxiety and uncertainty for artists. Therefore, "in more ways than one, censorship in Iran is the extension of physical power into the realm of the mind and the spirit."<sup>71</sup>

The government claims to curtail certain forms of expression only if they are considered incompatible with Islamic principles, which are of the highest value in Iran. Article 4 of Iran's Constitution states:

All civil, penal, financial, economic, administrative, cultural, military, political and other laws and regulations must be based on Islamic criteria. This principle applies absolutely and generally to all articles of the Constitution as well as other laws and regulation, and the wise persons of the Guardian Council are judges in this matter.<sup>72</sup>

This is not to say that freedom of expression is incompatible with Islam, but 'Islamic criteria' are certainly open to a variety of interpretations.<sup>73</sup>

Other articles in Iran's constitution also work to legitimize official censorship practices. For instance, Article 9 states:

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the freedom, independence, unity, and territorial integrity of the country are inseparable from one another, and their preservation is the duty of the government and all individual citizens. No individual, group, or authority, has the right to infringe in the slightest way upon the political, cultural, economic, and military independence or the territorial integrity of Iran under the pretext of exercising freedom. Similarly, no authority has the right to abrogate legitimate freedoms, not even by enacting laws and regulations for that purpose, under the pretext of preserving the independence and territorial integrity of the country.<sup>74</sup>

Article 24 states:

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<sup>71</sup> Article 19, 4-5.

<sup>72</sup> "Iran – Constitution," [http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/ir00000\\_.html](http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/ir00000_.html) (accessed December 10, 2008). The Guardian Council is an exceptionally powerful body that rests alongside the Supreme Leader and above the President. They are responsible for overseeing the activities of parliament and determining which candidates are qualified to run both for president and parliamentary elections.

<sup>73</sup> Article 19, 10.

<sup>74</sup> "Iran – Constitution".

Publications and the press have freedom of expression except when it is detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public. The details of this exception will be specified by law.<sup>75</sup>

Non-governmental actors also play a role in the mechanisms of state control over freedom of expression in Iran. The Constitution puts radio and television under the direct supervision of the religious leader and the three branches of government. State controlled media is known for playing a role in the dissemination of propaganda and often “besmirch journalists, intellectuals and artists that the state wishes to discredit, by labeling them as servants of imperialism, communists and agents of SAVAK (the secret police during the Shāh’s reign).”<sup>76</sup> Quasi-official vigilante groups, such as *Basīj*, also intervene when state-implemented censorship fails to exert control. Self-mandated to protect society from “damaging influences” they often use of force, threats and intimidation to ensure the public is upholding Islamic values.<sup>77</sup>

As already mentioned, the most significant challenge for musicians in the underground music scene is obtaining *mujāwwiz* in order to produce albums and play concerts, a process that often lacks clear criteria for acceptance. To date, few rock bands, rap artists, and fusion musicians have been successful in gaining this official permission. They have been denied for such reasons as having “inappropriate lyrics, especially those that declare love for anyone but Allah, grammatical errors, solo female singers, shaved heads, improper sense of style, too many rifts on electrical guitars and excessive stage movements.”<sup>78</sup>

Nooshin explains, “Musicians are therefore caught in a vicious circle: on the one hand, they can’t access audiences before securing *mujāwwiz*; on the other, bands tend to delay applying for *mujāwwiz* until they have material of sufficient quality to present to the ministry, ...[and] without a permit, bands are obliged to operate in an audience-free vacuum with no opportunity to legally present their work, even in informal settings.”<sup>79</sup> Therefore, in the face of official restrictions, musicians are forced to look for alternative means to play and distribute their music in order to gain audiences.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Article 19, 8.

<sup>77</sup> See Article 19; Human Rights Watch, *Guardians of thought: limits on freedom of expression in Iran*.

<sup>78</sup> Article 19, 45.

<sup>79</sup> Nooshin, “Underground, Overground”, 468.

Musicians have indeed become skillful in finding creative ways to continue engaging in their art and work around official restrictions. They rehearse in private, record their music with home recording equipment (which is often very low quality) or in private recording studios, circulate their music through informal networks and “under the counter” sales at music shops, and play secret concerts. There are some university venues that do not require gaining authorization from the *Irshād*, such as Milād Hall at the University of Tehran, Farabī Hall in Tehran’s Art University (*Dānishgāh-i Hunar*) and at the Tehran Conservatory (*Hunaristān-i Millī*) and many bands in the underground scene have performed at these venues. These venues are insufficient, however. Even for bands who have managed to gain authorization to perform, concerts are often canceled last minute for no apparent reason, or are disrupted or physically broken up by members of the voluntary religious militia, *Basāj*.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, with so few physical spaces to play music and distribute music, musicians in the underground scene have turned to the Internet and have created a virtual music community.

#### The Role of the Internet

With the increased access to the Internet in Iran beginning in the late 1990s, particularly among the middle classes, underground musicians have utilized the advancement of this technology in order to access audiences in and out of Iran (both Iranians in the diaspora as well as non-Iranians). Nooshin argues that, “the new grass-roots music was only able to establish itself and expand because of the possibilities offered through the Internet.”<sup>81</sup> On many levels, the Internet has offered Iranians a space to engage in a variety of forms of expression and its usage has completely skyrocketed. According to a Human Rights Watch Report in 2005, the number of Internet users in Iran has increased at an average annual rate of more than 600 percent since 2001, a figure unparalleled in the Middle East, only surpassed by Israel. As of 2006, Persian was the fourth most frequent used language for keeping weblogs and there was an estimated 75,000 blogs written in Persian.<sup>82</sup> Despite recent measures taken by the government in order to regulate Internet use, the rapid development of the Internet has provided Iranians with an alternative public discourse to the

<sup>80</sup> See Nooshin, “Underground, Overground”, and “The Language of Rock”.

<sup>81</sup> Nooshin, “The Language of Rock”, 73.

<sup>82</sup> Babak Rahimi, “The Politics of the Internet in Iran,” in *Media, culture and society in Iran: living with globalization and the Islamic state*, ed. Mehdi Semanti (New York: Routledge, 2008), 37-55.

state-controlled media and “poses one of the most important threats against authoritarian hegemony in Iran.”<sup>83</sup>

Indeed the Internet has also provided the underground music scene in Iran the same alternative space to defy restrictions imposed onto them. In comparison with other means of defying these restrictions – circulating their music in the black market or playing secret concerts – the Internet is a “relatively cheap, risk-free, and infinitely more flexible medium to access audiences both inside and outside Iran.”<sup>84</sup> Many bands have their own websites where they offer free music downloads, many have their music available for listening on You Tube and for purchase on I Tunes, and many have accounts on social network websites such as My Space and Facebook. The friend network websites are particularly helpful for the musicians to receive the type of audience feedback that they are otherwise deprived of.

A website that was instrumental in establishing and promoting the underground music scene, particularly during the movement’s early years, and still continues to support this scene today is tehranavenue.com. In 2002, tehranavenue.com held the first “Underground Music Festival” (UMC), an online festival in which musicians were invited to submit music for listeners to listen and vote upon. UMC was unparalleled in bringing attention to the plethora of bands operating underground and in giving the emerging movement an identity. There have been two other online music festivals since UMC – “Tehran Avenue Music Open” (TAMO) in 2004 and “Tehran Avenue Music Festival” (TAMF) in 2005. All three tehranavenue festivals included participants and voters from within and outside of Iran. These festivals have clearly demonstrated “the opportunities that global technologies offer musicians to circumvent government censorship and control.”<sup>85</sup>

Challenging Dominant Discourses on National Identity: Why Underground Music is Contentious and Subject to Censorship

Since the 1979 Revolution, cultural policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran have been established in order to preserve a sense of national identity reinforced with a moral character steeped in Islamic values. A significant component of these efforts have been to purify the nation of foreign elements, particularly Western elements. In the cultural sphere, this has been

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>84</sup> Nooshin, “Underground, Overground”, 472.

<sup>85</sup> Nooshin, “Subversion and Countersubversion”, 260.

demonstrated through the banning of Western music in the 1980s, as well as the most recent ban on Western music in late 2005. While authorities continue with attempts to maintain an isolationist stance in regards to its national identity, the regime is facing an extremely young, educated nation, one with approximately seventy percent of its population under the age of thirty. An emerging youth culture is developing in Iran which identifies itself as cosmopolitan and internationalist, who are seeking to be a part of a global culture, or to become 'global' (*jahānī shudan*), and whose voices of dissent are becoming increasingly more difficult to silence.

A significant part of this emerging youth culture in Iran is the underground music scene. The musicians and audiences who participate in this scene clearly view it as a space for youth expression and empowerment, yet “critics dismiss this music as yet another manifestation of *Gharbzādigī* . . . and attempt to exclude it from the central space of cultural discourse.”<sup>86</sup> Much of this criticism stems from the fact that much of the music does not have a sound considered obviously “Iranian” in its aesthetics. This perspective perpetuates a deep-seated norm that inserts notions of national identity inside the debates of Iranian musical aesthetics. Yet, like much of Iran’s youth culture in general, most musicians in the underground music scene are not looking to be bound to a nationalist identity, musically or personally. In fact, “many rock musicians are deliberately forefronting stylistic diversity in order to transcend national boundaries, to engage in cultural dialogue and to force a debate about Iran’s relationship with the outside world, particularly the west, and her future in an increasingly global environment.”<sup>87</sup>

This does not mean that national identity is unimportant to musicians in the underground scene. In fact, many musicians and bands produce music that articulates a pride in Iranian cultural heritage, whether it is articulated through the lyrics (i.e. utilizing the poetry of medieval mystical Persian poets or through defending the image of Iran to the outside world)<sup>88</sup>, or through incorporating traditional instruments and melodies in their music. Instead of a self-conscious imitation of the west, like many artists had done in Iran in the 1970s, many Iranian underground musicians are assimilating and authenticating styles in a way that ceases to make this music “external” in the same way that Iran’s youth culture is looking to transcend the isolationist brand of nationalism. Instead,

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<sup>86</sup> Nooshin, “The Language of Rock”, 76.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>88</sup> The rock band O-Hum uses the poetry of the mystical poets Rūmī and Hāfiz. In his song “*Huwwāt-i Man*” (“My Identity”), the rapper YAS defends his identity as Iranian in protest against the film “300,” a film that many individuals believe misrepresents Persians as savages.

they are seeking to forge themselves in a transnational community, to develop a new identity simultaneously rooted at home yet outward looking, and to engage in new discourses about what it means to be Iranian in the twenty-first century. Iranian authorities are well aware of that cultural change is often initiated through two things – the power of young people and the power of art. Considering that the underground music scene in Iran consists of both of these two powerful elements, the government will undoubtedly continue attempting to exert its control over this youth/music movement by exerting insidious forms of censorship. While underground musicians are forced to contend with this censorship, the Republic, too, will certainly continue to contend with the sheer numbers of erudite, dissatisfied youth who have clearly been determined to find creative ways to evade the censors and connect with the global youth culture.

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