

# Territory Jam: Tehran

Observers of Iranian politics can be forgiven for ignoring this recent headline: *Police clamp down on satellite TV users*.<sup>1</sup> The crackdowns on rogue television viewers have been reported periodically for the better part of two decades, though they're usually overshadowed by news of international economic sanctions, rigged parliamentary elections and the specter of war with Israel. Nevertheless, the satellite dish,

or *mahvareh*, has been a fixture on Tehran's roofscape since the early 1990s, serving up American reality shows, Latin American *telenovelas*, domestic and international news, and dozens of other illegal alternatives to the ideological and religious conformity of the six state-controlled channels.

The Iranian Parliament banned satellite dishes in 1995, as part of an effort to limit the influence of "Western culture," but enforcement has proved difficult. Despite door-to-door sweeps by security forces and electronic signal jamming, satellite use in the capital is at an all-time high. (Although reliable statistics are hard to come by, a reported 40 to 65 percent of the capital's population has access to satellite television.<sup>2</sup>) Tehranis flout the ban, pay the fines, secretly reinstall receivers, engage in all manner of camouflage and subterfuge—anything to keep the TV on. Until a few years ago, apartment dwellers would hide satellite receivers behind air conditioning units or laundry drying on the line. These days, the typical Tehran roof is so crowded that residents simply place dishes in the open and resign themselves to periodically replacing those destroyed by police.<sup>3</sup> Revolutionary guards who are denied entry to an apartment have been known to scale a building's walls with grappling hooks to dismantle receivers. It may seem like something out of a spy novel, but this cat-and-mouse game tells the deeper story of a complex exchange between the Islamic Republic and citizens of Tehran. In the absence of legitimate public space for discourse or demonstration, the satellite receiver opens a space for political dissent and cultural protest.

## DELEGITIMIZING PUBLIC SPACE

To understand how the satellite dish functions as a substitute for the spatial tactics of assembly and protest, we must first understand how Tehran's public spaces have been strategically delegitimized.<sup>4</sup> The space itself is

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there. Unlike in Cairo, where Hosni Mubarak systematically dismantled public spaces, including Tahrir Square, Tehran's recent mayors have added nearly 3,000 acres of parks, plazas and green belts, and the city now has 1,800 parks serving a population of 9 million, a ratio roughly comparable to New York City.<sup>5</sup> But Tehran's inhabitants are subject to strict behavioral laws, which mandate harsh penalties and imprisonment for socializing with a person of the opposite gender, deviating from the Islamic dress code, or participating in any but the most benign group activities. Women are publicly humiliated, fined, and detained by police for showing hair beneath their headscarves, wearing makeup, or even having a fake suntan. Meanwhile, young men are targeted for wearing Western-style clothing or long hairstyles, and both genders are prohibited from riding in the same car, speaking together in public or gathering in larger groups. The severity of the sentence varies with the political atmosphere but can include a fine, university expulsion, lashings, and up to 60 days of imprisonment.<sup>6</sup> These laws have become even more restrictive since the student uprisings in 2009.<sup>7</sup>

Today, activities in all parks, streets, and other public spaces are tightly controlled and highly choreographed. Morality and vice squads—efficiently divided into the Makeup Unit, the Relationship Unit and the Hijab Unit—arrive unannounced in police minivans at parks, shopping districts, and cafes popular with Tehran's youth. They round up offenders and take them to detention centers, often assaulting them verbally and physically. Shadowy officers on motorbikes accost groups of people talking or young couples walking alone on quiet streets. During crackdown periods, morality police appear weekly, sometimes daily, in the city's main public spaces, and it's not always clear which branch of Iran's complex law enforcement structure they represent. Some are agents of the Ministry of the Interior, charged with enforcing the Koranic principle of *amr-e be ma'ruf va nahy-e az monkar*, "commanding the just and forbidding the wrong."<sup>8</sup> Others are Islamic Revolutionary Guards, or special operations forces of the city police, or members of the even more extreme Basij, a volunteer national paramilitary unit notorious for violently suppressing demonstrations in 1999 and 2009.

In addition to punishing moral offenders, the Basij act as a neighborhood task force, organizing religious ceremonies and parades in local parks.<sup>9</sup> Branches of the city government also participate in the choreography of public space. Tehran's Municipal Council has recently increased Basij street patrols under the guise of "public safety." The mayor's office sponsors cultural programs such as the "Imam of Piety," which celebrates the life of Ayatollah Khomeini with public exhibitions and events, and has ordered the construction of 400 mini-museums, scattered throughout the city, that recreate the homes of Islamic martyrs.<sup>10</sup> In 2010, the city's Religious Activities Department announced that all parks would be required to host congregational prayers every Friday at noon:

The tradition of Friday prayers and muezzins reading verses from the holy book in loud voices has helped keep Satan away from our cities and villages. We must now make sure that the same sound will be heard in all the capital's parks.<sup>11</sup>



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Figure 1: Revolutionary Guard scales building to destroy satellite receivers



The sounds of these mandated assemblies echo through the streets, bouncing off the hundreds of new minarets, mosques, and prayer halls the government has built in public spaces across the city. Tehran's Municipal Council approved 30 new minarets in lower-income districts of South Tehran alone. In the greener, richer districts of the North Side, mosque projects are fewer but more noticeable, conspicuously placed across from secular venues like theaters and concert halls, reminding inhabitants of the regime's ubiquity.<sup>12</sup> Information about the funding and construction of these projects is murky. Officially, the Municipal Council works with planners and architects to approve plans, and construction companies hired by the city build the projects, but the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and other high-level government agencies can bypass this process and advance their own initiatives. Various organizations, nominally "charitable foundations," actually fund much of the construction, bolstered by private donors who want to curry favor with the government.<sup>13</sup> Only 12 percent of city dwellers go to mosques by choice, and so these same groups work in parallel to fulfill attendance quotas by bussing in rural civil servants to join true believers for Friday prayers, passion plays, and other state-sanctioned activities.<sup>14</sup>

Religious observances and events fill the parks several times a month; this January alone, there were four public holidays devoted to mourning religious figures. The rest of the time, they are used by groups that are usually left alone by the police: families picnicking with children, older men playing backgammon, citizens praying or engaging in city-sponsored activities. Sometimes there are periods of several months when even young people are left alone, creating an illusion that the spaces are becoming more democratic. But then the political climate shifts slightly, or summer arrives, and the morality squads once again dominate the public realm. During particularly tense days, police cars line the edges of the parks, watching over every move of the people. Predictably, this is jarring and creates a paranoid atmosphere even on calm days. As one student told me, "even when you are just walking in the street with your friends, you have to look over your shoulder. What was okay last week may not be okay this week."<sup>15</sup>

### **THE SATELLITE MAN**

Spaces of opportunity—for debate, leisure, discourse, spontaneous gathering, and protest—must therefore emerge behind walls, underground and, most commonly, in the home. Today the home is the true public realm in Tehran—the private place where residents can socialize comfortably and freely, unmonitored by the otherwise pervasive government. Some even invite strangers into their homes, hosting events for charities and non-governmental organizations and showing censored art in private "galleries."<sup>16</sup> Here residents piece together the news of their city, gathering information from illegal media, mounting daily challenges to the regime's monopoly on information.<sup>17</sup> Often the entire family gathers around a television in the center of the living room to catch up on Persian music videos filmed in Dubai or Los Angeles, watch dubbed soaps set in Mexico City or Miami, and catch up on news from London's BBC Persian Television or temporary channels set up by opposition movements. A particular favorite is *Parazit*, a satirical news

program in the style of *The Daily Show*, broadcast by Voice of America in Washington, DC.<sup>18</sup>

There is no more central character in this domestic narrative of cultural protest than the satellite man.

The satellite man is typically young, with an entrepreneur's zeal and a sense of adventure, often from the mercantile district of South Tehran. Trained by colleagues in the black-market niche of satellite TV installation, he begins by taking on overflow business, developing contacts with dealers smuggling dishes via boat and truck from Dubai or Central Asia; he then creates a loyal customer base through word of mouth.<sup>19</sup> He often works within groups of friends and families, driving around town to install the service for 150 dollars or so and returning for occasional maintenance. His predecessor, the video man, first joined the ranks of door-to-door vendors in the 1980s, carrying a black briefcase with videocassettes, alcohol, music, and other black-market goods, developing relationships with people in homes all over the city. The satellite man carries on the tradition, but in a much more dangerous zone. The vendor hawking romantic comedies is breaking the law, but the real threat to the regime is the man on the doorstep providing access to a 24-hour television channel beaming news from the opposition movement.<sup>19</sup>

And the regime takes the threat very seriously. It deploys signal disruptions, known as "territorial jamming" or "downlink jamming," from "noise stations" set up in small circular buildings throughout Tehran that host radio equipment operated by the Revolutionary Guards, or from mobile stations that drive around the city emitting microwaves. These stations scramble satellite feeds within a localized area, and the signal emerges as black-and-white static on neighborhood screens. The government also deploys "vertical" or "uplink" jams, sending a signal up to the satellite itself, preventing it from receiving information from broadcasters. This tactic is used infrequently, as the entire satellite signal, which the government depends upon to broadcast its own programming worldwide, will then be inoperable. And although the government admits to jamming foreign channels that it deems "propaganda," permanently removing signal access is not an option, since regime supporters and government officials monitor the illegal channels.

When a signal is jammed, the broadcasting companies are then forced to rent frequencies from other satellites. This can happen quickly, but as household dishes are oriented toward the blocked satellite, the stations won't have the same coverage until everyone on the ground reorients their receivers.<sup>20</sup> Signal jams occur without warning and can last for days, especially during periods of extreme political tension. They interrupt all kinds of programs, but especially news and analysis of events in Iran.

It is during these disruptions that the satellite man makes his secret house calls, stopping in for a cup of tea and discussing the news or soap opera that was interrupted, then climbing up to the roof and repositioning the receiver to capture favorite channels from a new satellite. Although not overtly political, the satellite man, like many other young Iranians, is usually disillusioned with the economic and political climate, and so discussion comes easily.<sup>21</sup>



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Figure 2: Mass water gun fight in Tehran park

## ENDNOTES

1. "Iranian Police Clamp Down on Satellite TV Users Ahead of Election," *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, February 18, 2012.
2. The official estimate is 40 percent, from "Roshd-e-Roozafnoon Hoozoor-e Mahvareh-Meeaan-e-Khanevadehayeh-Irani," Iranian Students' News Agency, November 2009, quoting Ali Darabi, Deputy Director of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting. More recently, Golnaz Esfandiari of Radio Free Europe reported that the number is closer to 65 percent; see "Nothing Comes Between Iranians and Their Satellite Dishes: Not Even the Police," March 13, 2012.
3. Paul Sonne and Farnaz Fassihi, "In Skies over Iran, a Battle for Control of Satellite TV," *Wall Street Journal*, December 27, 2011. See also Esfandiari, *op cit*.
4. As defined by Michel de Certeau—and recently discussed by Mimi Zeiger in *The Interventionist's Toolkit: Project, Map, Occupy—strategy* is "the calculus of force-relationships," in other words, the methodology used by those in power to maintain control, as opposed to the tactic, used by the powerless, which "can only insinuate itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety." By necessity, tactical spatial practices rely on improvisation, spontaneity, and an aggregation of events that unfold over time. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 1984) and Mimi Zeiger, "The Interventionist's Toolkit: Part IV," *Placesat* Design Observer, March 27, 2012.
5. Data from Ali-Mohammad Mokhtari, Director, Tehran Parks and Green Space Organization.
6. See Damien McElroy and Admad Vahdat, "Suntanned Women to be Arrested Under Islamic Dress Code," *The Telegraph*, April 27, 2010, and "Crackdowns over dress codes begin again in Tehran," BBC Persian Service, April 27, 2012 (in Farsi).
7. Asef Bayat, "Tehran, Paradox City," *New Left Review* 66, November 2010.
8. Azam Khatam, "The Islamic Republic's Failed Quest for a Spotless City," *Middle East Report* 250, Spring 2009.
9. Farnaz Fassihi, "Inside the Iranian Crackdown," *Wall Street Journal*, July 2009.

Visiting up to eight homes a night, he becomes the purveyor not only of contraband television but also of a lengthening chain of local news that links one house to the next. His customer's own voices are thus folded into the narrative.<sup>22</sup> Penalties can be severe for installing and watching anything other than state television, so the satellite man and his customers are conspirators in a risky activity. Fines run from 500 dollars for individuals to over 50,000 dollars for dish importers; more worrisome is possible imprisonment and corporal punishment.<sup>23</sup> With repeat visits every few months to re-install or calibrate the dish, or just add a few channels, the satellite man brokers relationships between citizens who wouldn't necessarily have access to one another in public life.

In *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space*, Anna McCarthy argues that television reflects a media power structure that exerts control locally over its site, in the space of an airport or bar, for instance, or in the home.<sup>24</sup> In Tehran, the state television is site-specific, but its control is weak: viewers use the satellite man to find the spatial loophole that allows them to thwart signal jams. As households throughout the city tune into the same underground channels, and as entire neighborhoods are subject to the same signal disruptions at the same time, television transcends the boundaries of the local site and is embedded as a series of nodes in the larger urban system, rendered visible by the network of satellite men moving from house to house, allowing communication to resume, temporarily unhindered.

## PUBLIC SPACE, TEMPORARILY

One reason that the revolutionary movements succeeded last year in places like Egypt and Tunisia was the element of surprise. Governments underestimated citizens' anger and frustration with years of oppression and were ill prepared to respond.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, the Islamic Republic (itself borne of violent revolution) anticipates exactly this type of group protest and reacts swiftly and violently. In June 2009, the immediate and brutal suppression of the Green Revolution crushed the nascent movement and sent the opposition further underground. In the years since, reformers' attempts to co-opt public space have been met with state violence, arrests and imprisonment. A group called the Mothers of Laleh Park, led by women who lost their children in the 2009 uprising, organized a demonstration in the spring of 2011 that led to detentions condemned by international human rights advocates. More recently, morality police have arrested young people who were using Facebook and other social media to organize flash mobs and seemingly apolitical gatherings, including "Bad Fashion Day," "The Meeting of the Curly Haired," and an 800-person water-gun fight.<sup>26</sup>

Iran's violation of the basic human rights of assembly and information access have long been condemned by the international community, most recently by the United Nations International Telecommunications Union, which declared that "jamming is a fundamental violation, not only of international regulations and norms, but of the right of people everywhere to receive and impart information."<sup>27</sup> Because legitimate public space is a critical element in any democracy, its absence can give rise to a more

ambiguous set of spaces in which the people exercise their rights. Under these conditions, even a quotidian ritual like watching TV can be part of a broader spatial and political agenda.

Years ago the cultural critics Kristin Ross and Alice Kaplan observed that “the political ... is hidden in the everyday, exactly where it is most obvious: in the contradictions of lived experience, in the most banal and repetitive gestures of everyday life.... It is in the midst of the utterly ordinary, in the space where the dominant relations of production are tirelessly and relentlessly reproduced, that we must look for utopian and political aspirations to crystallize.”<sup>28</sup> Tehrani satellite-television culture doesn’t guarantee a democratic future for Iran, nor does it substitute for public space, but it is a reminder of the various ways in which people find temporary places that allow them to remain connected, to gather spontaneously, and to create a sense of the public. We would do well to remember the debt that many democracies owe to such ambiguous spaces—places for people to gather their strength in preparation for change. ♦

10. Tehran Ministry for Cultural Affairs, official city website, en.tehran.ir.
11. “Tehran’s Public Parks to be used for Friday Prayers,” Shahrzad News Agency, April 17, 2010.
12. Bayat, “Tehran, Paradox City.”
13. David Thaler, et al, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, RAND Corporation, 2010, prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense, National Defense Research Institute. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, originally an ideological military body, has asserted itself in political and economic spheres since the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. Current and former members have run for office, donated money, and gained control of real estate and agricultural entities, making them extremely powerful in many aspects of society.
14. Bayat, “Paradox City.”
15. Author’s discussion with students at Azad University, 2012.
16. Benjamin Genocchio, “Revolution’s Long Shadow Over the Tehran Art Scene,” *New York Times*, March 30, 2011.
17. Hossein Sadri, “A Human Rights Approach to the Politics of Space,” presented at “Politics of Space and Place” conference, CAPPE Centre for Applied Philosophy, Politics and Ethics, University of Brighton, United Kingdom, September 2009.
18. “Al-Jazeera Takes on Parazit,” Tehran Bureau, *PBS Frontline*, November 18, 2011.
19. Juliane von Mittelstaedt, “Smuggler’s Paradise: Iran Sanctions Good for Business in Tiny Omani Port,” *Der Spiegel*, January 20, 2012.
20. Meris Lutz, “Opposition launches new satellite TV channel,” *Babylon & Beyond*, *Los Angeles Times* blog, September 3, 2010.
21. Sonne and Fassihi, “In Skies Over Iran, a Battle for Control of Satellite TV.”
22. Zahra Hosseinian and Hashem Kalantari, “Key Constituencies Disillusioned as Iran Votes,” *Reuters*, 1 March 1, 2012.
23. Shahram Khosravi, *Young and Defiant in Tehran* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).
24. Article 19, “Memorandum on Media Regulation in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” May 2, 2006.
25. Anna McCarthy, *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space* (Raleigh: Duke University Press, 2001).
26. Chrystia Freeland, “How Anger Took Elites by Surprise,” *The New York Times*, December 26, 2011.
27. Parisa Saranj, “In Iran It’s Fun to be a Rebel,” *NIAC Insight*, National Iranian American Council blog, 1 September 2011.
28. Broadcasting Board of Governors, “New Pressure on Jammers of International Broadcasts,” February 20, 2012.
29. Kristin Ross and Alice Kaplan, *Everyday Life*, Yale French Studies, Fall 1987.