Exit and voice in a digital age: Iran's exiled activists and the authoritarian state

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ABSTRACT

Digital communication technologies have given dissidents from authoritarian contexts better opportunities to pursue political activism from exile. After the exit from their home country, activists stay involved in domestic debates and channel politically relevant information to international audiences, building up external pressure on the regime. Yet, at the same time, digital media and social networks create multiple points of exposure that state actors can exploit. Using the case of Iran, this paper shows how digital communication technologies enable new and influence established tactics of state repression beyond borders. Based on interviews with Iranian activists and journalists who were forced to leave the country after the controversial elections of 2009, I analyze mechanisms and aims of repressive measures targeting exiled dissidents. I argue that in an environment of intense transnational communication and information exchange, authoritarian regimes can monitor and respond to the activities of political exiles rapidly and on a large scale. State actors seek to undermine the links of exiles into the country (horizontal voice) as well as to punish claims to public attention that challenge the regime's position in the domestic and international arenas (vertical voice). With these measures, authorities pursue a parallel strategy: expanding authoritarian power and practices beyond borders while distancing political exiles from contacts in the home country.

Introduction

Beleaguered by escalating political unrest, the Shah of Iran pressured the Iraqi government, in Autumn 1978, to restrict the activities of Ayatollah Khomeini who resided in the city of Najaf after his expulsion from Iran in the 1960s. Yet, the Shah's attempt to silence his fiercest opponent backfired. Khomeini turned to France and settled in a suburb near Paris where he suddenly stood in the limelight of international media. Hundreds of reporters queued to interview the charismatic cleric whose proclamations against the monarchy thus found a much larger audience and echoed back into Iran, only intensifying the uprising. Four months after leaving Iraq and 14 years after being exiled, Khomeini returned to Tehran, in February 1979, to become the triumphant leader of the Islamic Revolution (Moin, 1999).

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Khomeini was certainly Iran's most prominent but neither first nor last political exile. The country has a long history of emigration, particularly from its political and intellectual elites. Like Khomeini, numerous Iranian émigrés have sought to use the relative advantages of residing in Western host countries to pursue their political goals and influence developments in their home country. Likewise, many experienced the outreach of the Iranian state, too. From the Shah's powerful secret service penetrating oppositional student circles in Europe to the Islamic Republic's agents assassinating Kurdish opposition members in a Berlin restaurant—the Iranian state has repeatedly proven its willingness to repress dissidents beyond territorial borders, before and after the Revolution of 1979.

Recent political mobilization in Iran has produced yet another wave of emigration. The repression against the Green Movement, protesting the manipulation of the 2009 presidential elections, led to the exodus of hundreds of opposition supporters. Taking refuge in Europe and North America, these activists are better connected to their homeland than any of the previous generations of Iranian exiles. The internet and social media allow for close ties to the country and intense information flows between the in- and outside. Exiled activists engaged for political change and human rights in Iran often act as intermediaries channeling information and expertise to and fro the borders in order to bypass and build up leverage against authoritarian politics of control and repression.

The dynamics of such transnational advocacy networks and the role that digital media play for these forms of activism are topic of a rich and growing body of literature. (Abdelrahman, 2011; Beutz-Land, 2009; Castells, 2012; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Tarrow, 2005). The responses of authoritarian states to transnational activism and information exchange, however, have received scant attention. As the internet evolved into an important platform for the articulation and organization of dissent, authoritarian states have adapted and upgraded domestic systems of internet control and censorship (Deibert, Palfrey, Rohozinski, & Zittrain, 2011; Howard, Agarwal, & Hussain, 2011). In consequence of the global proliferation of surveillance technology, state actors are increasingly capable to monitor and compromise the communications of perceived opponents (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2014). In 2013, the revelations on surveillance practices of intelligence agencies in leading Western democracies by former contractor of the Central Intelligence Agency Edward Snowden not only exposed the astonishing extent of possible state interference in digital communications but also showed rapidly evolving tools and standards that other governments—in particular authoritarians—have since sought to emulate (Ganesh & Hankey, 2015; Greenwald, 2014). Has the internet's technological potential thus changed the capacity and inclination of authoritarian regimes to exercise power and control over citizens beyond national borders?

In this paper, I examine how digital communication technologies enable new and influence established tactics of state repression against political exiles. The experiences of Iranian activists and journalists who left the country following the suppression of the Green Movement after 2009 and pursued their engagement for human rights and political change allow to discern the ways state actors seek to contain information and advocacy activities outside the territory of the Iranian state.[1] Drawing on literature on transnational advocacy, digital media activism, and authoritarianism, I argue that in an environment of intense transnational communication and information exchange, authoritarian regimes gain opportunities to monitor and respond to the activities of political exiles rapidly and on a large scale. The networked character of online communication creates multiple points of exposure that state actors can exploit to penetrate and compromise the ties between exiled activists and people inside the country. At the same time, authorities are able to better identify and consequently punish claims to public attention which political exiles address either at domestic or international audiences in order to challenge the position of the regime. By targeting

what I term, following O'Donnell (1986), the horizontal and vertical voice of activists, the regime pursues a parallel strategy: one the one hand, it seeks to expand its power beyond borders to bring political exiles under closer control of the state again; on the other hand, it wants to separate them from contacts in the home country.

Exit and voice in a digital age

As other articles in this Special Issue, this paper takes Albert Hirschman's classic work on exit, voice, and loyalty as a point of departure to approach the dynamics of emigration and discontent as well as possible state reactions. Hirschman suggests two alternative options for people confronted with a dissatisfying situation within an organization, a community, or a country. Exit, in the case of political dissidents, means leaving the country, whereas voice refers to the articulation of discontent and opposition. Hirschman initially conceived these options as mutually exclusive: exit, in particular, is thought to undermine the impact of voice, as the latter is more costly in terms of effort and resources and thus requires dedicated and persistent challengers (Hirschman, 1978, 1993). The original concept has been questioned, criticized, and altered by numerous authors, not least by Hirschman himself. But it still serves as a useful heuristic framework to examine processes of migration and state–citizen relations in a globalizing world. Hoffmann, for instance, argues that contemporary forms of transnational migration can be seen as 'a reconfiguration of exit, voice, and loyalty […] defined precisely by the overlapping and simultaneity of these categories' (2010, p. 60).

To understand under what conditions forms of 'voice after exit'—like the articulation of discontent by political exiles—can effectively challenge the home regime and provoke a response, it is necessary to further dissect the dynamics of voice in authoritarian settings. In his reappraisal of Hirschman's concept in the context of the Argentinian dictatorship in the 1970s, O'Donnell outlines two different directions for 'voice': vertical and horizontal. While vertical voice addresses the government to transmit concern and dissatisfaction, horizontal voice describes the communication among citizens themselves. This internal debate among members of society is necessary for the recognition of common grievances and shared identities which may eventually lead to claims targeting the government—vertical voice—and transform into collective action. To O'Donnell, the prevention of horizontal voice represents the 'very core of authoritarian domination' (1986, p. 7). The more pervasive and encompassing the authoritarian power, the more it seeks to penetrate and undermine those forms of communication and sociability that foster alternative identities and ideas. The potential challenge of voice activities to the authoritarian state, accordingly, depends on the vitality of exchanges in society as well as on the impact of upward-directed claims that defy dominant views, norms and, ultimately, the legitimacy of the regime.

The example of Khomeini shows how different channels of communication enabled the revolutionary leader to convey his message to both circuits of voice, horizontal and vertical, despite being outside the Iranian territory. In Najaf, a religious center, Khomeini stayed in touch with his followers through the networks of Shiite clerics and pilgrims. In addition, recordings of the ayatollah's speeches were smuggled into Iran on audio-cassettes to be distributed in mosques and bazars (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi, 1994). When eventually pushed to leave Iraq for France, Khomeini's proclamations against the Shah gained even more effect because of the attention of international media. Since that time, the 'extensity, intensity, velocity and impact' of transnational communication flows have obviously increased as a result of globalization (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, & Perraton, 1999, p. 16). New communication technologies, in particular the internet, allow people after their exit to maintain ties in transnational communities and to have an impact on

politics in their home country (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010; Bernal, 2014; Brinkerhoff, 2009). Members of the Iranian diaspora, for instance, have used websites, blogs as well as satellite programs to provide audiences in Iran with alternative information and to participate in internal debates, circumventing state-controlled media and contributing to counterpublics (Michaelsen, 2015a).

Just as much as revolutionizing trans-border communication, the internet has altered the dynamics of contention. Emphasizing the opportunities for individuals to connect to each other and to share their beliefs and indignations, Castells argues that 'the fundamental form of large scale, horizontal communication in our society is based on the Internet' (2012, p. 229). The participatory and networked character of online communication supports the coalescence of geographically dispersed people around common interests and ideas. Although not without hierarchies, digitally enabled forms of protest and contention rely less on formal organization, strong leadership, and the traditional mass media —a major difference from the social movements of the twentieth century. Adherents are often mobilized rather spontaneously through personal networks; at the same time, the affordances of digital media allow for a rapid distribution of information and quick access to news cycles and public attention (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005). This has created a media environment in which individual activists gain more opportunities for the transmission of politically relevant content (Tufekci, 2013). During the 2009 protests in Iran, for instance, the social media profiles of a few exiled journalists played a key role in bringing news from the ground to international audiences as domestic and foreign media were banned to report from Tehran (Michaelsen, 2015b).

When oppressive regimes block the option to voice discontent inside the country, local activists turn to international media and NGOs in order to build up external pressure on their government (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). In these transnational advocacy networks, exiled dissidents can act as 'bridge figures' spreading information, helping to publicize and frame demands, and brokering relations between people in their home- and host country (Zuckerman, 2015, p. 171). To play such role, they need to maintain relations to peers in the home country (horizontal voice to the inside) and to succeed making effective claims to public attention that bring up criticism vis-à-vis the home regime—either by addressing state actors directly or by taking a detour and raising international awareness (vertical voice to the inside). In this process, digital media enhance scale, dynamics, and outreach of the communication of transnational political challengers. With the intensification of information exchanges across borders, authoritarians face a more diversified set of threats against their natural desire to prevent vital horizontal ties among citizens and contain vertical voice. Yet, at the same time, this paper argues, the environment of media and communications created by the internet also opens up new opportunities for authoritarian states to control dissent outside their territory.

Repressing without borders

Authoritarian rulers generally respond with some form of repression to activities they perceive as threats to their power. Therefore, repression is considered a pillar of authoritarian stability, targeting primarily civil liberties like freedom of expression and information (Gerschewski, 2013; Møller & Skaaning, 2013). Control over communication is central to authoritarian power preservation, as authorities seek to curtail any information that risks to undermine their position and legitimation as well as to gather intelligence that serves to expose and suppress potential dissenters. Authoritarian states subject media to censorship and monitor citizens' communications to a varying degree, depending on the nature of the regime (Geddes & Zaller, 1989; Hafez, 2005).

Research on repression is mostly concerned with how and when state authorities employ different repressive strategies. Repression is seen as taking place '*within the territorial jurisdiction of the state*, for the purpose of imposing a cost on the target as well as deterring specific activities and/or beliefs perceived to be challenging to government personnel, practices or institutions'(Davenport, 2007, p. 2, italics added). The potential reach of repression beyond the borders of the nation state, however, is rarely considered. Among the notable exceptions, Ragazzi describes the 'simultaneous policy of banning and exporting the security apparatus abroad' as one possible relationship between governments and their diasporas. Autocratic states can carry this approach to an extreme and brand emigrants as outsiders or even enemies whose activities need to be surveilled and suppressed (Ragazzi, 2009, p. 386). According to Shain, regimes see political exiles especially as a threat when these are able to raise international criticism and pressure. In response, 'home regimes may employ a wide range of symbolic and coercive measures at home and abroad to discredit political exiles as illegitimate and destroy them as a political force' (Shain, 1989, p. 146). Differentiating between domestic and international measures, he mentions propaganda campaigns against exiles' reputation, property confiscations, persecution of relatives, and isolation from supporters in the country, on the one hand, and citizenship withdrawal, infiltration of exile groups, pressure on the host country and finally kidnappings and political assassinations, on the other (Shain, 1989, p. 146). Moss (2016) and in her contribution to this Special Issue highlights how the Libyan and Syrian regime used similar measures of transnational repression to deter political mobilization in the diaspora during the Arab uprisings. In the case of Syria, she specifically points out that the potential risks and consequences of online surveillance discouraged diaspora members' decision to show support for the resistance against the Assad regime on social media.

As digital media became central instruments for dissidents and activists, helping to share information, expose rights violations and garner support, authoritarian states sought to gain control over these networks of online communication. In addition to filtering and blocking internet content, state authorities rely on targeted surveillance, persecution of critical online activity, penetration of and attacks against activist networks and publications (Deibert, 2013; Morozov, 2011). Online monitoring and cyberattacks have pulled activists who fled persecution in their home country closer within the reach of state authorities again (Citizen Lab, 2015, p. 26). Hankey and Ó Clunaigh argue that digital media have created new vulnerabilities for human rights defenders, exposing their 'whereabouts, activities and networks, and creating evidence against them through data leakages, digital traces, and direct surveillance and interception' (2013, p. 536). With rapidly evolving technologies, activists have clear disadvantages vis-à-vis state actors because of their unequal access to knowledge and resources as well as the latter's capacity to control critical infrastructure and platforms, such as internet and mobile phone providers (Hankey and Ó Clunaigh, 2013, p. 538).

The opportunities to wield repression beyond borders with the help of digital technologies as well as possible combinations of old and new threat strategies that emerge from an environment of intense transnational communications clearly merit further attention. Iran appears as a pertinent case in point, as the regime has repeatedly sought to repress and curtail activities of political exiles. In the 1980s and early 1990s, still influenced by the repercussions of the revolution, Iran's security agencies did not shy away from assassinations of opposition figures abroad (Hakakian, 2011; Shain, 1989, p. 160). With the consolidation of the regime, the inclination to such extreme measures has certainly decreased. Nevertheless, state authorities remain suspicious toward the political activities of Iranian emigrants and dual-nationals (Human Rights Watch, 2016; Moaveni, 2015). In the threat scenarios of regime hardliners, they are part of a larger Western conspiracy seeking to undermine the

political system and corrupt revolutionary values in Iran. In the same vein, external media reaching out to publics inside Iran and popular social media applications are seen as tools in a 'soft war' against the Islamic Republic (Price, 2015, Chapter 7: 'Soft power, soft war'; Sreberny & Torfeh, 2014). Staff at the Persian services of the BBC or Voice of America has been put under pressure by the arrest of relatives and smear campaigns in Iranian state-affiliated media, similar to techniques analyzed in this paper (Esfandiari, 2013; Human Rights Watch 2012a; Kamali Dehghan, 2013a). In order to control online communications, Iran has built a multilayered system of internet censorship and the security agencies have set up several units for policing the internet, targeting among others activist networks and transnational connections (OpenNet Initiative, 2013).

Data and methodological approach

Research into repressive strategies of authoritarian states is by nature difficult. Uncertainty and opacity are inherent characteristics of authoritarian rule that even those in power need to mitigate (Schedler, 2013). State actors will hardly explain their understanding of who to repress for what reason and with what technique to a researcher. Therefore, this paper focuses on the potential targets of transnational state repression: Iranian journalists and human rights activists living in different Western countries. Their experiences give insights into possible strategies, mechanisms, and triggers of repression by the Iranian state. For a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews, 14 Iranian activists were identified through previously existing contacts of the researcher and subsequent introductions. In addition, three non-Iranians with expertise in transnational repressive tactics against Iranians in exile were also interviewed: the program manager of a Farsi language media institution and two researchers on digital attacks against civil society actors. Where necessary, interviews were translated from Farsi to English, then transcribed and analyzed using open and focused coding.

Although this approach is based on convenience sampling, it allowed to gain a certain diversity of views and experiences. The Iranian interviewees, eight men and six women, were based in the US, Canada, Germany, France, the Netherlands, the UK, and the Czech Republic. Four of them were experts on digital security in different civil society organizations with both personal and professional experience in digital threats and attacks. Three interviewees left Iran a few years before 2009 but stayed involved in human rights advocacy with close links to Iran; the others left Iran in the years after the election crisis. Most interviewees belong to the young generation of the Iranian reform and human rights movement, while three experienced political activism already during the 1979 Revolution. Most of them agreed to reveal their real identity; the names of those who preferred to stay anonymous were changed and marked (*). The interviews were conducted between August and November 2015, either in person or over the telephone and by Skype. All are referenced simply as 'Interview' throughout the paper in order to prevent interferences on the geographical location of those respondents who wish to remain anonymous.

The researcher also considered possible drawbacks of the sample: the interviewed high-profile activists may not only attract more repressive measures than others but may also have an interest to exaggerate threats in order to underline the relevance of their activities. At the same time, their prominent position and the mostly definite character of their exit from Iran may imbue them with a certain immunity against threats. The information gained with this approach thus risks to distort both scale and effects of repressive state measures directed at overseas citizens. However, in conjunction with secondary sources, the interviews soon revealed recurring experiences and patterns which confirmed statements among each other and allowed to quickly reach a level of

saturation. In addition, media and advocacy reports were used to contextualize and corroborate first-hand information. Consequently, this paper is able to analyze one particular, but nonetheless important set of repressive measures targeting activists beyond borders. Future research could widen the angle to include other potential target groups such as citizens with a less distinctive profile of political activism or with the intention to return regularly to the home country.

Repression and emigration in Iran after 2009

The protests against the official result of the presidential election in June 2009 confronted the Iranian regime with an extraordinary crisis. The Green Movement which formed around the opposition candidates and initially mobilized large numbers of the urban middle classes swiftly evolved from calls for a recount of the votes to broader demands for political change. Uniting the different groups of Iran's civil rights movement as well as the reformist political elite, the movement severely challenged the authority and legitimacy of the regime (Ansari, 2010; Bashiriyeh, 2010). The conservative leadership and the security apparatus responded with an escalation of repression. In the crackdown, thousands of demonstrators were arrested, partly subjected to torture and abuse, and a number also killed. Security forces systematically rounded up leading figures of the reformist movement and civil society. Repression against any forms of dissent continued also after public protests came to an end, stifling civic and political activism throughout the following years (Human Rights Watch, 2012b; Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, 2010).

As a consequence, hundreds of political activists, human rights defenders, and journalists left the country to escape judicial persecution and imprisonment. According to figures of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) the number of asylum applications filed by Iranians increased significantly after 2009.[2] Interviews with Iranian political exiles reveal that the decision to leave the country was not only an inevitable reaction to threats and harassment from security agencies but also closely linked to the intention to continue activism from abroad. Nader*, a civil society activist who left Iran in autumn 2009 explains: 'Because the atmosphere in Iran became so tense and repressive, I thought that it would be better to continue my work outside the country' (Interview, 10 September 2015).

It is impossible to estimate how many of those who left in the aftermath of 2009 pursued their activities outside given the necessity to secure a living and the profound changes that went along with emigration. A number of Iranian journalists were absorbed by the Farsi sections of Western media institutions, like the BBC, Radio Free Europe, and Deutsche Welle, or other media projects targeting audiences in Iran, such as Radio Zamaneh in the Netherlands and Manoto TV in the UK. Other political exiles were able to enter civil society and media organizations in the host countries or to set up independent projects. In general, the Green Movement and the subsequent arrival of numerous young activists from Iran have injected new initiative into the broader Iranian diaspora in the host societies, overriding previous cleavages and involving more members of the second generation (Kelly, 2011, p. 450). Together with the heightened awareness of Western media and policy circles regarding the situation in Iran, this helped to bring about a number of new initiatives giving exiles the opportunity to engage, in one way or another, for human rights, civil society, and political change in Iran.

Given the impossibility to travel to Iran, the internet remained the main channel to gather information and maintain relations inside Iran for all activists in exile. Ali Fotovvati, a civil society activist now working as a journalist for a news media underlines:

> Without the internet our hands are tied. […] It's a very important medium for our work. Both for our relations inside the country and for distributing and collecting information. I cannot imagine a life with more than one hour without internet. (Interview, 6 October 2015)

Yet, as the following analysis reveals, the internet not only became an essential platform for exiled activists to connect to networks and peers inside Iran but it also exposed them to more intense contact with state authorities.

Targeting political exiles

For an initial approach to the mechanisms of state pressure seeking to curtail activities of political exiles, I differentiate between measures that directly target the activists and others that are directed at their links and relations to people inside Iran. Some of these measures build on traditional forms of repression against political exiles, others unfold exclusively on the internet. However, digital media and transnational information networks play into the dynamics of all of them.

After the election crisis of 2009, the Iranian regime upgraded its capacities of internet control. At the time, hacker groups with obscure affiliations to state institutions started cyberattacks and website defacements against domestic and foreign targets. The self-declared 'Iranian Cyber Army', for instance, claimed attacks against Twitter and the Persian section of Voice of America as well as several online media of the Green Movement (OpenNet Initiative, 2013). External Farsi news media experienced a peak in so-called distributed-denial-of-service attacks temporarily interrupting their online services and making websites unavailable to users (Interview, 14 October 2015). Iranian activists in Europe and North America were repeatedly targeted by different types of online attacks seeking to gain access to their email and social media accounts. Negar Mortazavi, an Iranian journalist in the US who was involved in the organization of demonstrations of Green Movement supporters, describes that during the time unknown people with suspicious accounts sought to penetrate her social networks on Facebook:

> They would use these fake accounts that have a generic name with a generic photo or without a photo. […] They tried to add us as friends with these new weird accounts and to get into our circles and monitor us. (Interview, 30 October 2015)

Since 2009, Iranian hackers have engaged in cyberattacks against an array of targets outside Iran, ranging from government organizations in the region and beyond to private companies, international researchers as well as political opponents and critics in the diaspora. By nature, it is difficult to attribute the origin of such attacks to specific actors, even less state authorities. Research into the infrastructure and malware used by the perpetrators allows to conclude that they were working from inside Iran. Also, the selection of targets, particularly among Iranian civil society and diaspora actors, corresponds to political and strategic interests of Iran's hardline and security establishment (Clearsky, 2015; Guarnieri & Anderson, 2016; Trendmicro, 2015). A strong link between Iranian state authorities and attempts to penetrate the email and social media accounts of exiled activists was revealed when a section of the Revolutionary Guards detained Arash Zad, an Iranian ICT expert and start-up entrepreneur, at the Tehran airport in August 2015 and shortly after phishing emails were sent out from his account to his contacts (Alimardani, 2015).

In a range of attacks against members of the Iranian exile community, in 2015 and 2016, the perpetrators used personal information gleaned from social media sources in order to develop customized scenarios tricking the targets into revealing their passwords. Some activists got telephone calls in which the other party showed knowledge on their hobbies and social relations prior to

sending them a related email with corrupted files. Others received fake messages from their email provider notifying of a suspicious sign-in attempt to the account and urging to change the password. Files or links enclosed to these messages were again compromised with malware. The attackers also sent out false invitations to seminars, press releases, or official letters from government institutions in the host country. Part of these phishing attempts even tried to overcome the so-called two-factor authentication, an additional security hurdle of online services, which requires the attacker to constantly monitor the reactions of the target person (Citizen Lab, 2015; Guarnieri & Anderson, 2016). Experts on digital security agree that the attacks were technically not very sophisticated, yet the persistence and attention devoted to the targets remarkable. Especially, the social engineering that prepared and accompanied the attacks required a considerable amount of time and human resources (Interviews with three Iranian and one Western expert on digital security, 3 June, 9 June, 26 August, 16 September 2015).

In some cases, attempts to penetrate email and social media accounts were combined to more open threats and even direct contact of activists from members of the Iranian security apparatus. Masih Alinejad, a journalist who runs a successfully publicized social media campaign against the mandatory veil in Iran, received threats both by email and publicly on Facebook:

> My Facebook and my email are full of threats. I don't fear these threats but they leave nevertheless an impression on my thoughts. If I publish the photo of a woman on the Facebook page of the Stealthy-Freedom-campaign it will get 300 similar comments in a day. With different identities they will write 'Death for Masih Alinejad'. It's a lot of pressure. They also leave a lot of insulting and vulgar comments. (Interview, 16 September 2015)

Working for Radio Farda, a news media with a significant audience in Iran, the journalist Vahid Pourostad reports that even after he changed his email, 'an agent had found my new address and wrote threats to me or asked me to come to Turkey to talk to him and told me to not work against my country' (Interview, 16 November 2015).

The activists see digital threats and attacks on their communication platforms primarily as a message from Iranian security agencies, signaling that they are being monitored. Although the attacks rarely interrupt their activities, they create pressure and additional costs, as activists are forced to consider their online behavior and protect their communications. Reza*, an activist for internet freedom and digital security expert who was equally targeted by the described phishing campaign, explains:

> Usually when I post a photo of food or where I am, I post it after I left the place. Never when I'm still there. When I am giving a talk, I ask the organizers not to put my biography on their website but to send it to the participants in a private email. Because they [the Iranian authorities] can use it to social engineer you and others. (Interview, 26 August 2015)

The journalist Negar Mortazavi, mentioned above, underlines the necessary efforts to keep up with changing threats:

> I always have this fear because technology and hacking methods change. So I have this fear that maybe there is a new method that I don't know about, that I am not paying attention to. […] Cybersecurity is not my field and I am not even interested in it. But it's something that I have to follow just to be safe. It's an extra burden. (Interview, 30 October 2015)

In addition to targeting networks and communications online, security agents also use established offline methods to threaten and coerce exiled activists. Part of the activists who left Iran have pending lawsuits that not only inhibit any possible return in the near future but also serve as an additional

means of pressure. The human rights lawyer and Nobel Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi who chose not to return to Iran from a conference travel in June 2009 is certainly the most prominent target. She reports on judicial harassment and even direct threats to her life which she gets over the phone and by email:

> I receive threats and my file in the Revolutionary Court is always open. Using the excuse that I haven't paid taxes for the money that I received with the Nobel Prize, the authorities have confiscated and sold my possessions in Iran. […] The regime has put a lot of effort into silencing my voice but they have not succeeded. This is why they started to regularly give me death threats. They say that if you don't keep silent you will be killed. (Interview, 28 September 2015. See also Ebadi's [2016] memoir on her struggle for human rights, regime reactions, and exile)

Mansoureh Shojaee, a women's rights activist who left Iran in 2010, points out that between 2011 and 2013, she received four summons to interrogation at her address in Tehran in direct consequence to her activities in Europe, such as giving interviews or participating in a demonstration: 'This put me under a lot of pressure because my husband and my son were over there and my house was under bail'. When Shojaee had to change the lawyer overseeing her affairs in Iran, she was forced to go to the Iranian embassy for an official statement which put her under additional stress: 'This is how they keep control over us: who has a passport and who not? Who has asked for asylum? These are means of control' (Interview, 14 October 2015).

The aforementioned measures that directly target activists, both online and offline, can be analyzed as attempts to expand the security apparatus beyond borders. Online attacks, judicial harassment, and direct threats convey the impression that even though exiles have left the Iranian territory, they are still under the control of state authorities. The internet provides security agencies with a tool to monitor exiled dissidents closely and to come up with immediate responses to their activities. The different platforms for online communications and relations allow for the collection of up-to-date, sometimes intimate information and represent gateways to infiltrate personal lives and social networks, independent of the target's location. While these measures certainly impose additional pressure on political exiles, they rarely deter them from their activities. The interviews reveal that activists adapt and consider the risks and consequences of their activities more carefully, particularly with view to protecting links to Iran.

Undermining relations and distancing activists

If measures that directly target the activists, like digital threats and judicial harassment, seem to draw them closer within the reach of the authoritarian state, other indirect tactics of repression aim to distance the exiles from the home country. The intrusion attempts against social media not only signal the monitoring of exile activities by state authorities but also alert to possible perils for contacts in Iran. Some respondents report that inside contacts were arrested after their email and chat communications had been compromised. In other cases, intelligence agents used information gathered through online surveillance and hacking of email accounts to pressurize arrestees during interrogations. The risk to expose inside contacts is even more accentuated for external Farsi news media, which depend heavily on information from Iran and often rely on contributors in the country using pseudonyms. Several interviewees mention that the Iranian security agencies reportedly sought to uncover the identities of such reporters in interrogations of political prisoners (Interviews, 6 and 14 October, 16 November 2015). The journalist Vahid Pourostad points out that state authorities also warn political figures and observers in Iran to not give interviews to outside media, otherwise

'the regime will create a case against them' (Interview, 16 November 2015). This adds, of course, to the general difficulty of external news media to obtain authentic and relevant information from inside the country.

The threats against horizontal links into the country contrast with the freedom that exiles have gained with their exit from the territorial jurisdiction and immediate power sphere of the authoritarian state. All respondents underline the importance that staying in touch with developments in Iran has for their work. At the same time, advocacy and information activities obviously require a certain degree of public presence and often it is the perspective to be able to voice critique and dissent more freely that motivates political emigration. The women's rights activist Mansoureh Shojaee analyzes the resulting dilemma:

> The more active you are outside Iran, the closer you get to being labeled as a red line inside Iran. There is an inverse relation between opportunity and threat. […] Being an activist means getting a name, giving interviews, writing constantly—you can all do this freely here outside Iran and it is an opportunity. But day by day it puts your links inside the country more in danger. (Interview, 14 October 2015)

This tension certainly has an influence on the activities of political exiles. Individual activists and civil society organizations will often weigh the impact that successful claims to public attention have on their work in relation against the importance of horizontal ties into the country. Nader*, who works with an organization that engages in the education and capacity building for civil society activists in Iran, prioritizes the safeguarding of strong relations into the country:

> Under these circumstances, we have to be careful to protect the security of our partners inside Iran and at the same time continue our activities. […] As long as you keep a low profile they leave you in peace. But as soon as you attract more attention and they feel it's becoming too much, there is a response. Therefore we follow a strategy of low profile. (Interview, 10 September 2015)

Another organization that engages in public advocacy in the field of human rights prefers to not cooperate directly with people inside Iran but relies on anonymous and crowd-sourced submissions of information through their website (Interview, 26 August 2015). Also journalists working for the external Farsi news media need to establish secure communication channels to obtain information and guarantee the safety of their informants (Interviews, 6 and 14 October 2015).

Apart from threats against the professional links of political exiles to the home country, security agencies also apply pressure on personal ties. Harassment and interrogations of relatives inside Iran are prominent measures to check and punish outside activists. Threats against families can be seen as an escalation of repression against exiles as they target predominantly the relations of activists with a certain public profile or journalists and anchors in important media programs (see also: Esfandiari, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2012a). Vahid Pourostad, who works for one of these media and specialized in reporting on political prisoners and human rights, mentions that family members were summoned for questioning and interrogations to prevent him from publishing (Interview, 16 November 2015). The journalist Masih Alinejad has achieved significant attention from international media with persistent reporting on the victims of repression in 2009 and her Facebook-campaign for women's rights. In exchange, security agents brought Alinejad's father to cut ties with her: 'Nine times they took him and told him that his daughter is morally corrupt, that she is against Islam, she works with Israel against our country. My father doesn't talk to me anymore' (Interview, 16 September 2015. See also: Kamali Dehghan, 2013b; Khalatbari, 2014). State agents also tried to pressure the family of Shirin Ebadi to prevent her from advocating against human rights violations:

> They went after my sister. My sister […] has no link to my work. Nevertheless they put her in prison and pressurized her so much that she had a heart problem. Now she is free. Then they went after my husband who lives in Iran. They imprisoned him and put him under physical and psychological pressure. (Interview, 28 September 2015)

Targeting relatives in Iran is probably the most effective means to curtail the activities of political exiles. Respondents underline that it requires a lot of dedication and often personal sacrifice to surmount this kind of pressure. Mansoureh Shojaee remembers other political activists who, after their exit from Iran, limited public appearances and in one case even openly admitted in a panel discussion to have 'people held hostage in Iran' (Interview, 14 October 2015). Personal ties into the country clearly impact the 'degree of autonomy' that emigrants can acquire against attempts of the home state to exercise power over citizens abroad (Koinova, 2012, p. 100).

Repression against professional and personal links into the country aims to limit the exiles' scope of agency and pushes them further away from the home country. An additional means of distancing and banning are smear campaigns and slander in state-controlled media, which seek to undermine the reputation of political exiles and signal to both them and their contacts in the country that they have crossed a red line. 'This shows that they are following our activities. One month ago I had an interview with a French radio station and [hardline newspaper] Keyhan immediately published an article against me', explains civil society activist Nader* who also thinks that these media campaigns undermine the confidence of some partners in Iran to collaborate with activists in exile (Interview, 10 September 2015). Again, mostly, but not exclusively, the more prominent and visible figures of the exile community are attacked by hardline media. The husband of Nobel Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi was lured into a plot of alleged adultery by security agents and then forced to confess on national television against his wife, declaring that she was involved in a Western conspiracy to topple the Iranian regime (Interview, 28 September 2015; Ebadi, 2016). Outspoken journalist Masih Alinejad was subject of several programs trying to taint her character:

> They started broadcasting programs that portrayed me as morally corrupt, as a prostitute, a drug addict. Repeatedly they asserted that I am in the service of the UK, the Queen, the intelligence services, the MI6. [After the success of my FB-campaign] they announced on television, as a news information, that I had been raped. (Interview, 16 September 2015)

Sexual allegations are a recurring motif in the accusations of Iranian hardliners against dissidents and the confessions security agents seek to extract from political prisoners. Given Iran's still largely conservative society and the religious state ideology, it seems a particular way of attacking and discrediting opponents and of associating them to Western, non-Iranian values.

Repressing horizontal and vertical voice

The analysis of measures seeking to curtail the activities of political exiles and their impact inside Iran reveals different patterns of triggers, targets, and aims of repression. Table 1 gives a schematic

Table 1. Mechanisms and aims of repression against political exiles

		MECHANISMS	
		EXPANDING REPRESSION ABROAD	BANNING AND DISTANCING AT HOME
AIMS	PUNISHING VERTICAL VOICE	Judicial harassment	Pressure on relatives
		Direct threats (email, telephone)	Attacks and slander in state media
		Cyberattacks against online publications	
	UNDERMINING HORIZONTAL VOICE	Phishing and hacking	Pressure on inside contacts
		Monitoring and surveillance	

overview on the outlined repressive methods, separating measures that target exiles directly and expand repression beyond borders from others that are directed against inside contacts and seek to distance exiles from their home country. The table also distinguishes between the two aims of undermining horizontal voice and punishing vertical voice. In practice, the paper has shown, these different analytical categories are often intertwined and building upon each other.

Monitoring, surveillance, and the penetration of online networks represent permanent and diffuse threats looming over activists in exile, facilitated by the significance that the internet and social media have gained for their activities and in their daily routines. These measures not only demonstrate the reach of authoritarian power beyond borders, permeating the lives of exiles, but also threaten to expose contacts in the home country who risk to face persecution and imprisonment. With these measures, therefore, state authorities seek to undermine the networks and vitality of transnational horizontal voice.

Vertical voice, on the other hand, is contained by pressure on families and smear campaigns inside the country as well as judicial harassment and other direct threats against exiles or cyberattacks against their media. The analysis has shown that this set of measures occurs in response to attempts of political exiles to raise either international criticism against the regime or to circumvent domestic information controls in order to provide audiences in Iran with alternative information. Women's rights advocate Shojaee remembers that the prosecutor in Tehran confronted her husband with recordings of her interviews for different media:

> Interviews are the most terrible thing for them. Interviews in Farsi because they influence people inside Iran, inform them, spread the discourse of the opposition. Interviews with foreign media because it destroys the image they try to give themselves in international organizations and in foreign policy. (Interview, 14 October 2015)

Repressive measures that aim to stifle the dynamics of transnational vertical voice are predominantly directed against people who can act as 'bridge figures': Members of the exile community who are not only well connected to the inside via the ties of horizontal voice, but who are also capable, because of their status, function, or relations, to channel this information to a greater or different set of audience. State authorities particularly put pressure on figures like Shirin Ebadi and Masih Alinejad because they are able, each in her own way, to bring information on conditions in Iran to the attention of international media or human rights institutions: Ebadi because of her reputation as human rights lawyer and Nobel prize laureate; Alinejad because she first acquired, through her skillful use of social media, the status of a 'microcelebrity' (Tufekci, 2013) which then led to international recognition for her engagement.[3] Authorities also target journalists working for influential external news media with the capacity to influence audiences inside Iran. In both cases, the activities of these exiles challenge the Iranian regime—either by taking a detour through pressure built up in transnational advocacy networks or by providing alternative information that shapes political debate and opinion formation inside Iran.

Conclusion

For political exiles, the exit from their country never meant a complete negation of the ability to voice criticism and discontent against the home regime. While previously effective political activism from exile required organization, leadership, and access to mass media, as highlighted in the Khomeini episode, digital communication technologies have altered the dynamics of political contention beyond borders. The internet and social media have multiplied channels for connections between in- and

outside and on a transnational scale. Political exiles participate on a daily basis in debates in their home country and act as relays in advocacy networks, transmitting information to international audiences and raising pressure on the home regime. At the same time, exit also never meant that political exiles fully escape the influence of the authoritarian power they had fled. State authorities have long sought to control dissidents outside their territory. Yet, the environment of intense communication and information exchange that the internet sustains enables authoritarian regimes to monitor and respond to the activities of political exiles with greater scope and speed. As much as it is central to their activities, communication on digital media and social networks exposes activists to constant levels of state surveillance. The paper has shown that state authorities use information harvested online to infiltrate and weaken the ties between exiles and contacts in the country. They are also able to keep track of a greater variety and number of claims to public attention that challenge the regime either domestically or internationally, and to retaliate accordingly. While some of the state responses to transnational activism uniquely unfold online, others recall more traditional measures of authoritarian rulers against exiled dissidents: Pressure on relatives in the country, propaganda campaigns, and judicial harassment have been employed throughout the twentieth century to silence forms of 'voice after exit' (Shain, 1989). In the digital media environment, however, the 'scale and dimension' of these extended authoritarian practices seem unique (Hankey & Ó Clunaigh, 2013, p. 536).

With the aim to undermine transnational horizontal voice and to contain vertical voice from outside, state actors seek to expand their power over dissidents beyond borders, while concurrently separating them from contacts in the home country. Threats of surveillance and network intrusions, for instance, maintain persistent and subtle pressure on all activists in exile, inducing insecurity and mistrust in cross-border linkages. Cyberattacks represent a form of punishment that neither requires significant resources nor allows for a clear attribution to state institutions, reducing legitimation costs for repression. Last but not least, state authorities can proceed against the family of any exiled activist and unleash a smear campaign as soon as her participation in a demonstration or a media interview is circulated on social media. Digital communication technologies clearly increase the intensity, outreach, and immediacy of potential contacts and conflicts between state actors and political exiles. Nevertheless, the paper revealed that dissidents who endured persecution and harassment in their country and chose to exit in order to pursue their activities outside are not necessarily deterred by these measures of repression but adjust to an evolved set of threats. In this sense, the transnational repressive practices of authoritarian regimes need to be seen as a form of adaptation to the challenges of the digital age rather than as an expression of enhanced authoritarian power and stability.

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Notes

1. Following Shain, I define political exiles as engaged in 'political activities directed against the policies of a home regime, against the home regime itself, or against the political system as a whole, so as to create circumstances favorable to their return' (1989, p. 15). The activists interviewed for this paper all strongly believe in political and social change and engage in activities that target policies of the Iranian regime; their activities are transnational, in that they cooperate not only with contacts inside Iran but also with like-minded exiles scattered over other host countries. This includes also journalists who left Iran because of their political convictions and take part in such activities.
2. In 44 industrialized countries with individual asylum procedures, there were 11,537 new asylum applications from Iranians in 2009, 15,185 in 2010, and 18,128 in 2011. Figures cited in: Human Rights Watch (2012b).
3. In 2015, Masih Alinejad received the women's rights award of the Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy.

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