

Introduction

Much like my now-defunct blog, this book is a product of my political and affective engagement with the Iranian diaspora, revolution, and war. My research on Weblogistan, the Iranian blogosphere, took shape during the “global war on terror,” when the global was uncannily local for many who sensed belonging to multiple homes and whose gendered and sexed lives were deployed to legitimize death in the name of rights. Although far removed from the immediate material effects of war to which millions of Iraqis and Afghans were subjected, the anxiety of a military attack on Iran preoccupied my diasporic body that had held memories of the Iran–Iraq war. Haunted by the fear of a possible war against one home while being constantly under surveillance by measures of national security in another, I combined my academic research with internet activism by participating in antiwar Persian and English blogs. With more than 100,000 Persian blogs, Weblogistan had become the spotlight of international media. The imminent threat of a military attack against Iran during the “war on terror,” when Iran and Iranians were/are marked as belonging to the “axis of evil,” motivated me to write a blog as a form of cyber-activism and gave me a way to feel connected to others who shared the same concerns, regardless of our multiple political positions. More than a decade later, and despite the nominal end to the “war on terror,” bombs and drone attacks continue to expend lives in Yemen, Palestine, and Syria, while economic sanctions debilitate the Iranian population, subjecting Iranians to slow death.

In a resurgence of a “total war” (Khalili 2013; Terry 2017), the connective tissue among the rise of fascism, militarized white masculinity, rampant Islamophobia, antiblack violence, anti-immigrant laws in North America and Europe, and the death and debilitation of certain populations in the Middle East (Puar 2017) seems to be the conjoined technologies of security and freedom that cultivate some lives and expend others.

This book focuses on the production of democratic life in Weblogistan and its relationship to the imminent death of risky populations, in a time when (cyber) civil society and freedom exist in a “plane of immanence” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) with geopolitics, biopolitics, and necropolitics. More specifically, this book argues that while enabling resistance and political mobilizations as elements of transnational Iranian civil society, in its heyday Weblogistan was inevitably intertwined with the *politics of rightful killing*: a form of politics that concerns not only the community of Iranian bloggers in cyberspace but also the offline lives of the Iranian population at large. The politics of rightful killing explains the contemporary political situation where those, such as the “people of Iran,” whose rights and protection are presented as the *raison d'être* of war, are sanctioned to death and therefore live a pending death exactly because of those rights. Seen as a “window” for surveillance and data collection, and an effective venue for the dissemination of neoliberal discourses of democracy and freedom, in the first decade of the new millennium Weblogistan attracted immense attention from neoconservative think tanks and liberalizing regimes. It was in the context of internet democratization projects that Weblogistan became a site of the production and normalization of digital citizens who “practiced democracy” and imagined a desired future. Weblogistan became the virtual laboratory where the competing discourses of nationalism and neoliberalism, and the affective registers of belonging and desire, convened to produce and normalize gendered exceptional citizens in a phantasmic shuttling between a glorious, immemorial past and a democratic future. Notwithstanding the aspirations of the desiring Iranian digital citizens, I argue in this book that the possibility of exceptional citizenship is foreclosed, as risk inevitably traverses Iranian bodies inasmuch as they belong to a population that is subjected to the politics of rightful killing: the politics of death in relationship to an unstable life that is at once imbued with and stripped of liberal universal rights.

Blogging Shall Set You Free

Web gives a voice to Iranian women.

— ALFRED HERMIDA, *BBC NEWS*

On the other side of the international division of labor from socialized capital, inside and outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, can the subaltern speak?

— GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK, "CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK?"

"Take one exasperated Iranian woman. Add a computer. Hook it up to the Internet. And you have a voice in a country where it's very hard to be heard." These words appeared on CNN.com's World Section on February 19, 2004.¹ Quoting Lady Sun—a prominent Iranian woman blogger in Tehran who later immigrated to the United States and then to the United Kingdom—this article exemplifies enthusiastic news coverage about the proliferation of blogs in Iran. In these reports, the internet is often depicted as the liberating force that gives voice to Iranians, especially women, who are assumed to have been silent prior to their internet access.² For example, consider this excerpt from Ben Macintyre's "Mullahs versus the bloggers," which celebrates the internet as a "new species of protest" and introduces Weblogistan as the "land of free speech":

But if Iran, under the repressive rule of the ultraconservatives, is silencing the sound of Western pop, in another area of its culture, a wild cacophony of voices has erupted. . . . This is the place Iranians call "Weblogistan": a land of noisy and irreverent free speech. The collision between these two sides of Iran—hardline versus online—represents the latest, and most important, battle over freedom of speech. The outcome will dictate not only the shape of Iran, but also the future of the internet as a political tool, heralding a new species of protest that is entirely irrepressible.³

Macintyre's narrative about the clash of "hardline versus online" is not an uncommon representation of the role of the internet in Iran. In fact, most enthusiastic scholarly and journalistic accounts about the popularity of blogs in Iran rely on a sharp distinction between the repression of freedom in Iran and liberal democratic ideals, which are assumed to exist in the "West." It is argued that Iran's lack of freedom of speech in print media has attracted younger generations, especially women, to the "democratic" world of blogging.

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By Alfred Hermida
 BBC News Online technology staff



Women have few ways to express themselves in Iran

The web is providing a way for women in Iran to talk freely about taboo subjects such as sex and boyfriends.

FIGURE I.1 “Web Gives a Voice to Iranian Women,” <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/sci/tech/2044802.stm>.

Undoubtedly, in the first decade of the new millennium Persian-language blogging became quite popular among some educated Iranians in Iran, especially those residing in urban areas. Even though increased access to the internet in Iran was an important factor in the rise of blogging among Iranians in Iran and in its diaspora, the hypervisibility of bloggers in mainstream international media cannot be solely attributed to technological developments in Iran. Nor can this hypervisibility be reduced to the usual narrative of lack of freedom of speech in Iran and its abundance in North America and Europe. During my research, most of the high-profile Iranian bloggers lived outside of Iran, particularly in locations where “freedom of speech” is assumed to be a right granted to all citizens. In fact, some of the most famous and popular Persian blogs, including those that popularized Persian blogging and received attention from mainstream international media, were written in North America

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Technology

Freedom in Farsi blogs

Tens of thousands of Iranians have embraced weblogs as a way to access the forbidden and challenge the sanctioned, writes N Alavi



▲ An image by Iranian photographer Shadi Yousefian vividly portrays the dual identity experienced by young people in Iran

N Alavi
Mon 20 Dec 2004 10:02 EST

In September 2001, a young Iranian journalist, Hossein Derakhshan, devised and set up one of the first weblogs in his native language of Farsi. In response to a request from a reader, he created a simple how-to-blog guide in Farsi, thereby setting in motion a community's surreal flight into free speech; online commentaries that the leading Iranian author and blogger, Abbas Maroufi, calls our "messages in bottles, cast to the winds".

FIGURE 1.2 “Freedom in Farsi Blogs,” <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2004/dec/20/iran.blogging>.

and Europe. The freedom-of-speech narrative does not quite explain why a large number of popular Persian blogs were written in North America. This paradox, as I will show in this book, can be explained only through an examination of the role of the Iranian diaspora in the narratives of civil society, freedom of speech, bloggers’ rehearsals of democracy, democratization projects during the “war on terror,” and the politics of rightful killing.

Cyber-enthusiast accounts with short-term memory often overlook histories of social struggles, erasing any trace of preceding offline histories of struggle in their celebrations of “internet revolutions” in the Middle East. Ignoring the implication of cyberspace in nationalist, militaristic, and neocolonial discourses and practices, celebratory accounts of Weblogistan portray it as a stage for the rehearsal of democracy and freedom of speech, the bedrock of a revolution, and a new ground upon which the Iranian civil society flourishes.



FIGURE I.3 “The Revolution Will Be Blogged,” http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2006/03/06/iranian_bloggers.



FIGURE I.4 “Blogs Opening Iranian Society?,” <https://www.wired.com/2003/05/blogs-opening-iranian-society>.

In fact, less than a decade before the 2009 Iranian Green Movement became known as the “Twitter revolution,” and before Twitter and Facebook revolutions gained currency in the lexicon of the recent uprisings in the Middle East (a subject that I discuss at the end of this book), “blogging revolution,” also known to some as the “turquoise revolution,” named the role of the Iranian blogosphere in the language of democratization, reminiscent of the post-Soviet color revolutions that enshrined civil society.⁴

Undoubtedly, Persian blogging among Iranians in Iran and its diaspora is a historically specific phenomenon that owes its emergence to several contingent factors. As I will discuss in this book, some of these factors include the improvement of internet technologies in Iran, increased immigration of young computer-savvy Persian-speaking Iranians to North America and Europe, the desire to participate in the politics of homeland from a distance, and performances of democratic subjecthood in cyberspace. The increased emphasis on the political potentials of internet organizing in the “age of information,” the opportunities for political participation, and entrepreneurial aspirations of a segment of the Iranian diaspora who provided expertise and testimonials on matters relating to Iran may also have contributed to the fast popularity of Persian blogging.

Whether the popularization of Persian blogging and the events following September 11, 2001, are coincidental or not, the fact remains that the emergence of Weblogistan was subjected to historical and political civilizational discourses and practices that gave it meaning in the context of the “global war on terror.”⁵ During its peak, Weblogistan was a site of production of civilizational knowledge, where Iranianness was claimed and contested through gendered and sexed performances of political intervention and where the desire for exceptional digital citizenship and democratic futurity was cultivated. As Mino Moallem argues (2005a), in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution the print culture of modernity has gradually been replaced by mass-mediated communication. While Moallem’s incisive analysis examines cinematic space after the revolution, I suggest that cyberspace plays a significant role in the formation of transnational subjectivities and the management of life and death of the Iranian population. In the post-1989 period, which marks the end of the Iran–Iraq war, the rise of the reform movement, the gradual liberalization of the Iranian economy, and the emergence of democratization projects after the fall of the Soviet Union, the increased access to internet technologies in Iran and its diaspora has made cyberspace an important venue for the articulation of gendered subjectivities and political interventions.⁶ The popularization of

the internet and the emergence of social media in the new millennium gave rise to neoliberal digital citizenship—a form of citizenship that assumes equal and democratic political participation in cyber civil society, is predicated on the logic of market and neoliberal entrepreneurship, justifies security in the name of freedom, demands technologies of self to normalize the population according to white heteronormative ideals of the universal human, and cultivates the desire for a “democratic” future that is imagined through the subversive capacity of civil society.

Unlike accounts that depict civil society as the mainstay of social movements and democracy, in this book I trace the ways in which Weblogistan, as a manifestation of transnational civil society, is not just a site of dialogue and resistance to the state but also a site of governmentality where normalization and the conduct of conduct operate under the rhetoric of democracy in a neoliberal and militarized world. Contrary to the accounts that celebrate Weblogistan as a unified, democratic, revolutionary, and antistate online community that epitomizes the promises of civil society, I show that it is exactly because it is—and not despite being—an element of civil society that Weblogistan is where violent conflicts take place, inequalities that exist offline are reproduced online, desiring subjects—who aspire to exceptional citizenship—are normalized according to nationalist and neoliberal discourses, and neoliberal self-entrepreneurs/experts produce and disseminate information about Iran when cyber-revolutions dominate the lexicon of democratization projects of the empire. Ultimately, I argue, Weblogistan as a part of the transnational Iranian civil society is where the desire for exceptional citizenship and democratic futurity is cultivated, while the Iranian population is simultaneously subjected to the politics of rightful killing that forecloses futurity.

Cybergovernmentality and the Fad of Civil Society

Like many Iranians of my generation, I am the product of a peculiar infatuation with civil society. Having lived through the 1979 revolution and the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq (1980–88), I left Iran in 1989.⁷ That year marked the end of a decade known in postrevolutionary Iran as “*daheye shast*” (the “60’s decade” according to the Iranian Solar Hijri calendar)—perhaps the most repressive period after the revolution when the exigencies of war made any form of dissent nearly impossible. The year 1989 was a significant one, not just in my personal life as a young queer immigrant facing new disciplinary

measures and political sensibilities but also in the world to which I belonged. It marked the beginning of the political shifts that came after the eight-year war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini (1902–1989), the leader of the Iranian Revolution.⁸ The subsequent liberalization and relative social freedoms during the two-term presidency of Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani between 1989 and 1997 and the landslide victory of President Mohammad Khatami in 1997 were closely linked to the emergence of the reform movement, the labor movement, the women’s movement, and the student movement in the post-1989 period.⁹ The year that I left Iran also saw a series of events in Eastern Europe that came to be known as the “1989 revolutions,” “color revolutions,” “the fall of communism,” and the end of the cold war. A new era was under way. Democratization, civil society, and economic liberalization became buzzwords of a neoliberal rationality that replaced the logic of the cold war with a new normal: accelerated market liberalization coupled with “freedom” through seemingly “nonviolent” color revolutions, which would be followed in a decade by the militaristic violence of the “war on terror.”

The post-1989 events in Eastern Europe, and the “democratization” impulse articulated through the notion of color revolutions, gave civil society a new currency. As James Ferguson (2006b) points out, unlike the Marxian notion of civil society as the arena of alienation, exploitation, and domination in capitalism, in the context of the recent history of Eastern Europe, civil society came to be valorized as the road to democracy.¹⁰ Ferguson rightly argues that the currency of civil society in the Reagan–Thatcher neoliberal agendas to “roll back” the state, along with the postsocialist “democratization” wave, culminated in the universalization of civil society as the fad of national and transnational politics (91).

Even as the concept of civil society with all its different meanings in historical periods has been developed in the West, it has gained much currency in the “third world,” where projects of democratization enshrine civil society institutions as indices of progress on the road to liberal democracy.¹¹ In the studies of the Middle East, as Sami Zubaida (2001, 232–49) has argued, the dominant narrative is that, as the basis of democracy, civil society is an oppositional force against totalitarian states that have controlled society and denied social autonomy. To counter this trend, the narrative goes, it is necessary to not only hold elections and form political parties but also to initiate political participation of the individual through autonomous institutions (232).

Much of the optimism about the internet in the Middle East is informed by the “fad” of civil society and the democratization impulse. But this trend is

not limited to the neoliberal and neocolonial agendas of exporting democracy through military intervention. There is also enthusiasm among the left about the potentials of the internet in enabling civil society in the Middle East, where civil society is assumed to be a rarity. Whether civil society is seen as a gateway to democracy in post-Communist societies in which state bureaucracy dominated all spheres of life, as a leftist response in the West against the neoconservative capitalist atomization through the formation of nonstate associations, or as an amalgamation of new social movements with democratic aspirations, civil society is often imagined in a vertical and oppositional position in relation to the state. As Sunil Khilnani argues, regardless of their differences, the dominant views on civil society consider it to have the potential to curb the state in different domains (2001, 14). If a conservative approach sees civil society to be located in the cultural acquisitions and “inherited manners of civility” that moderate the relationships between groups and individuals, the liberal position on civil society sees the power of civil society to be residing in the economy. A more radical position places the promise of civil society to be resting in a society that is independent of economy and the state.¹²

In this book I adopt a different conceptualization of civil society, in which the state and civil society are intertwined and not defined in a static control/freedom relationship. This would entail relinquishing an imaginary that James Ferguson has called the “vertical topography of power” (2006b, 90–92). Ferguson calls into question the common top-down state-society relationship in analyses of state and civil society, where civil society is constituted of a range of institutions placed between the all-encompassing state at the top and the family at the bottom. Rather than the vertical model of state and civil society, I approach civil society as a site of governmentality in the Foucauldian sense: “the ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge[,] political economy, and its essential technical means apparatuses of security” (Foucault 1988, quoted in Burchell, Gordon, and Miller 1991, 102).¹³ I situate Weblogistan as a part of Iranian transnational civil society, and as such a site of governmentality. As a node of “transnational governmentality” (Ferguson and Gupta 2002), Weblogistan includes sexed and gendered strategies of regulating and disciplining that are imposed by complex international and transnational networks in neoliberal economies and are enabled by willing subjects whose desires are articulated in the lan-

guage of rights, where the protection of rights legitimizes military interventions by “liberating” forces.

One of the mechanisms of liberal governmentality, Miller and Rose (1992) argue, is inscription. Writing as a normalizing technique that transmits repeatable instructions for the conduct of self can enable rule at a distance through networks and by making phenomena into calculable information that further enables the government of conduct of a population. Networks play a key role in transmitting this information (which is not neutral) for long-distance government. The government of conduct of those who are distant is aided by mechanisms of networking without appearing to impinge on their “freedom” (in fact, in the case of the internet, often conducted in the name of freedom). The “conduct of the conduct” is not limited to the law or the state power but employs forms of power that enable the government of individuals, their desires, and their bodies in the realm of civil society. Using the insights of these scholars, in this book I argue that as a part of transnational civil society, Weblogistan became an important site of *cybergovernmentality* where the condensation of nationalist and democratization discourses during the “war on terror” produced and disciplined particular sexed and gendered subjectivities that aspired to exceptional neoliberal citizenship (Grewal 2017) in online and offline encounters. I define cybergovernmentality as a significant mode of transnational governmentality (Ferguson and Gupta 2002) that operates through online and offline normalizing techniques; uses experts, diasporas, and media technologies; relies on a neoliberal economy; and employs security as its mechanism of calculation to discipline and regulate populations according to the ideals of liberal democracy.

As I will discuss in this book, the condensation of nationalist and neoliberal discourses in Weblogistan and performances of democratic Iranian-ness during the “war on terror” sought to normalize particular sexed and gendered subjectivities as exceptional digital Iranian citizens in online and offline encounters. As a part of the transnational Iranian civil society, Weblogistan was a new site where heated debates about Iranian politics took place among internet-savvy Iranians in Iran and its diaspora. These debates highlighted the gendered, sexed, and racial exclusions of a futurity that was imagined through rehearsals of democracy and freedom in Weblogistan. As a technology of self, “practicing democracy” became the buzzword among some Iranian internet users who assumed their blogging world to be a microcosm of the Iranian population at large. In Weblogistan, normative Iranian subjectivities were

neither solely produced and regulated according to the Iranian nationalist discourses nor by an assumed unidirectional neoliberal order. Rather, hegemonic forms of Iranianness were produced (and constantly reproduced) in a complex and multidirectional discursive, affective, and economic assemblage that included Iranians in Iran, diaspora Iranians, and competing and complicit nonstate, para-state, and state entities (of several states) that operated under governmental and nongovernmental nomenclature.

The most representable (in mainstream media) Iranian bloggers as neoliberal self-entrepreneurs imagined a democratic Iranianness that drew its force from hegemonic nationalist ideals, while aspiring to an exceptional citizenship that valorized secular and liberal freedom achieved through individualism, self-interest, and participation in rehearsals of “democracy” in the realm of cyber civil society. Yet the desire for proximity to exceptional citizenship continues to be unattainable for the willing Iranian cyber-citizen, as the fear of an impending threat is inevitably attached, or to borrow from Sara Ahmed, “sticks” (2004, 4) to Middle Eastern bodies. It is in this context that many diaspora Iranians insist on highlighting their difference from Arabs and the Middle East. This distancing is not necessarily a corrective to the orientalist representations that collapse all difference in the Middle East, but a strategy of disassociation from the hypervisible figure of the “Arab terrorist” in the face of violent anti-Middle Eastern and anti-Muslim sentiments in North America and Europe. The popularity of the model-minority discourse (exemplified in television programs such as *The Shahs of Sunset*), U.S. politicians’ distinctions between the “Iranian people” and the “regime,” and Netanyahu’s praise of Silicon Valley Iranians do not obliterate the deep anti-Iranian sentiments that exclude Iranians through immigration laws while rendering them disposable through deadly sanctions.¹⁴ Notwithstanding the desire for proximity to whiteness, displays of market virility, and disavowal of Arabness as strategies to survive anti-Muslim and anti-Arab racism, Iranians who aspire to exceptional citizenship are constantly shuttling between rightfulness and rightlessness, as the looming fear of the Middle Eastern “terrorist” travels through contagion (to borrow from Puar), implicating all Iranians and marking them “risky citizens.” In other words, the risky citizen in the digital realm is a self-responsible individual, apt for democratization through biopolitical and ethico-political practices that seek to normalize the (currently undemocratic) population according to the ideals of liberal democracy. However, unlike the exceptional citizen who is folded into life, this unstable figure who simultaneously maintains a desire for liberal democracy and a sense of be-

longing to a population that embodies a pending threat to the security of the “international community” can become disposable at any given moment. The male nationalist intellectual who desires democracy, the woman activist who desires sexual freedom, the docile homosexual who aspires to a “normal” life, and the diasporic expert/entrepreneur who produces knowledge about Iran are a few figures who exemplify risky citizens in Weblogistan. Apt for democratization and simultaneously disposable, these figures shuttle between hyper-visibility and unrepresentability.¹⁵

Experts, Risky Business, and Security

Homeland security is not a temporary measure just to meet one crisis. Many of the steps we have now been forced to take will become permanent in American life. They represent an understanding of the world as it is, and dangers we must guard against perhaps for decades to come. I think of it as the new normalcy. . . . Terrorism is a menace to the entire civilized world.

— FORMER U.S. VICE PRESIDENT DICK CHENEY

Iran’s people are our allies. We must get behind the democrats and the dissidents in Iran and find all the ways we can to help the Iranian people. . . . Iranian people want freedom. The mood in the region is in favor of democratization.

— MARK PALMER, COMMITTEE ON THE PRESENT DANGER

There is no liberalism without a culture of danger. . . . Control is no longer just the necessary counterweight to freedom, as in the case of panopticism: it becomes its mainspring.

— MICHEL FOUCAULT, *THE BIRTH OF BIOPOLITICS*

In the first decade of the new millennium, Weblogistan became the center of attention for the democratization industries and “experts” who deployed notions of international civil society, freedom, preemption, and security to ensure the geopolitical interests of the empire and global capitalism. The allocation of funding (by the U.S. Department of State and the Dutch Parliament) to the Iranian diasporic media with the purported aim of promoting democracy in Iran, the proliferation of discourse about helping “opposition groups” in Iran and its diaspora to hasten regime change in the post-9/11 era, the timely emergence of Persian blogging as a fast medium for transnational exchange

of information all brought Weblogistan into the spotlight of democracy projects. It is not surprising, then, that the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD)¹⁶ identified the Iranian blogosphere as a window through which “we” (the “international community”) may monitor Iran: “Iran’s regime has reason to worry. With its growing scope and reach, the Iranian ‘blogosphere’ can give the international community a unique window into the nature of the Islamic Republic, a damning chronicle of its repressive human rights practices, and—perhaps most importantly—insights into its intrinsic social, economic and political vulnerabilities. So, why aren’t we paying attention?”¹⁷

The fact is that “we” were paying attention and monitoring the Iranian blogosphere in different think tanks and research centers. There was increasing interest in Persian blogs by state and nonstate institutions such as the U.S. Library of Congress, Harvard University’s Berkman Center for the Internet and Society, the National Endowment for Democracy, and think tanks such as the Hoover Institute and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. For example, Berkman Center’s Internet and Democracy Project’s three case studies illuminate the geopolitical motivations of research on the internet, even as the research is conducted by “civil society organizations.” The research investigated “the impact of the Internet on civic engagement and democratic processes” in Iran, South Korea, and Ukraine (note the geopolitical significance of the selected case studies).¹⁸ While the research on Ukraine explored the role of cell phones in information sharing and organizing protests during Ukraine’s Orange Revolution, the Iran case study, titled “Mapping Iran’s Online Public: Politics and Culture in the Persian Blogosphere,” analyzed the “composition of the Iranian Blogosphere and its possible impact on political and democratic processes.” The goal of these case studies, as the Berkman Center’s website states, was “to draw initial conclusions about the actual impact of technology on democratic events and processes, and to identify questions for further research.”¹⁹ The report claimed that “given the repressive media environment in Iran today, blogs may represent the most open public communications platform for political discourse” (2).

These think tanks celebrated Weblogistan for its assumed democratization potentials, but their reach went beyond influencing public opinion in the United States. For example, the Committee on the Present Danger’s “experts” testified in the U.S. Congress in order to shift the U.S. policy toward Iran.²⁰ Hard to miss in the name of this organization is the assumption of a “present” danger. This presence connotes a materiality (it is here) and a temporal urgency (it is here now). Danger, as Robert Castel (1991) has argued in the case of pre-

ventative social administration techniques in France and the United States, is a paradoxical notion. It affirms both the quality of danger immanent in a subject and a mere probability, for the proof of danger could be provided only after the fact. It is this unpredictability that conveys the idea that even if a person appears calm and harmless, they may become dangerous. Nowhere is the fear of unpredictability clearer than a statement on CPD's website, in which 1.5 billion Muslims are deemed suspect:

The ideology of Islamist terror by itself poses a dangerous threat, capable of evil committed in the name of God. Fueled by the accelerant of state support, the threat of Islamist terror increases dramatically. But, in this case, what is proliferating are not weapons but self-anointed holy warriors. . . . Murderous ideology being nothing new, the question becomes how does this threat from radical Islamic terrorists compare to previous threats? The principal difference between this ideology and the expansionist fascist and communist regimes that preceded it in the last century is that Islamist terrorism is not a regime at all. It is the perversion of a major religion (approximately 1.5 billion members worldwide) through delusions of Muslim victimhood.²¹

The fine line between risk and danger in the rhetoric of antiterrorist experts invites a preemptive temporality wherein the risk of a disastrous future is tied to a present danger that justifies annihilation of entire populations (through war or sanctions) as an insurance measure. As a neologism of insurance, risk, as François Ewald (1991) has argued, has three characteristics: first, it is calculable; second, it is collective; and third, it is capital. Insurance technologies work through predicting and calculating the probability of the risk of a repeatable damage. In this case, the possibility of the repetition of the September 11 attacks and the threat of Islamic radicalism are both predictable risks and present dangers. Despite their differences, in the logic of CPD, "Islamic radicalism" repeats the threat of communism as the enemy of liberal democracy, while every Muslim embodies that risk. It is not surprising that in 2005, Mark Palmer the neoconservative cofounder of the National Endowment for Democracy, the former Vice Chair of Freedom House, the Reagan-era ambassador to Hungary in late 1980s, and a CPD member, authored a book titled *Breaking the Real Axis of Evil: How to Oust the World's Last Dictators by 2025*, in which he recycles the logic of "information revolution" in the former Soviet states. Similar to samizdat in the Soviet Union, Palmer advocates for the training of dissidents in places like Iran through communication

technologies. Rather than fax and copy machines, this time the internet is seen as the fast vehicle for democratization. In other words, Palmer hopes to achieve the widespread regime change in Eastern Europe in the Middle East through repeating the cold war strategies, including training and funding of local dissidents by “outside democracies.” These dissidents would in turn train the populace on how to blog and have street protests, à la Gene Sharp’s philosophy of “nonviolence” that was used in the Eastern European “color revolutions.” Following Palmer’s lead and funded by the U.S. Department of State, Freedom House issued a report on internet freedom in fifteen countries (including Iran). Diaspora dissidents such as Mohsen Sazegara used the U.S. Department of State–funded Voice of America Persian and blogs to disseminate videos in which they taught Gene Sharp’s “nonviolent” protests in Farsi to internet users in Iran.

The second characteristic of risk is its collectivity. While each subject is expected to act as a self-responsible individual who buys insurance (and in return expects individual compensation in the case that a disaster happens), insurance against a probable damage is not just to protect oneself but also a sign of good/exceptional citizenship in the name of the common good. As opposed to misfortunes or accidents that affect an individual, risk affects a population. Insurance against risk brings solidarity under the rhetoric of mutual interests. It is “our values” as the international civil society and “our way of life” that need to be protected from the risk of terrorism. As Castel argues, when the idea of risk is separated from danger, a systematic predetection becomes possible. Every individual must willingly submit to modalities of intervention that do not locate the danger in a subject but that instead calculate risk factors and statistics in the population. Thus, while the elimination of dangerous individuals such as Osama bin-Laden becomes necessary, that measure in itself does not eliminate the probable risk. The entire population is subjected to technologies of surveillance under the rhetoric of security. The insurance broker/expert’s job is not only to calculate risk but also to produce it. Therefore, “experts” in universities, foundations, and think tanks who seek to protect the neoliberal market, coupled with ideals of liberal democracy, not only calculate the risk that terrorism poses to “the international community” but also discursively produce what constitutes terrorism. It is the probable risk that justifies the surveillance of the entire population through the logic of “security.” As such, security is integral to regulatory practices that compel members of the “international civil society” to willingly ask for protection against the risk of terrorism. As Foucault has noted, the double exigency of

liberalism and security, which requires state intervention, constitutes the paradox of liberalism and is at the core of the “crisis of governmentality” (2007, 384). The implementation of the U.S. National Security Agency’s warrantless surveillance of email and the internet under the “terrorist surveillance program” after September 11, 2001, highlights a paradox inherent in narratives about freedom on the internet. While several civil liberties organizations challenged the U.S. surveillance acts for their unconstitutionality, the U.S. courts of appeals consistently dismissed these legal cases, upholding George W. Bush’s executive order that authorized warrantless surveillance. This form of surveillance not only engaged the state apparatus but also the private telecommunication companies. After AT&T was sued in 2006 for disclosing its network records to the National Security Agency (the case was eventually dismissed), in June 2008 Congress passed legislation that warranted telecommunication firms immunity against spying lawsuits.²² Interestingly, this form of surveillance was (and continues to be) done in the name of protecting Americans against the “terrorist threat.”

The third and last characteristic of risk, according to Castel, is capital. Like Castel, Ewald argues that what is insured against risk “is not the injury that is actually lived, suffered and resented by the person it happens to, but a capital against whose loss the insurer offers a guarantee” (1991, 204). The coupling of the risk of terrorism with the risk that threatens global capitalism becomes clear in the testimony of Henry Sokolski, the executive director of the Non-proliferation Policy Education Center (NPEC). Sokolski, who testified alongside Mark Palmer—the CPD representative and the U.S. ambassador at the 2006 U.S. congressional hearings on Iran’s nuclear policy—presented a study conducted by Rice University researchers titled “Getting Ready for a Nuclear-Ready Iran.”²³ In his testimony, Sokolski claims that “historically, after a major terrorist attack in Saudi Arabia, markets worry, the price of oil increases, and Iran’s own oil revenues, in turn, surge upward. Given that one-fifth of the world’s entire oil demand flows through the Straits (as well as roughly a quarter of America’s supply of oil) and no other nation that has fortified its shores near Hormuz, an Iranian threat to disrupt commerce there would have to be taken seriously by commercial concerns (e.g., insurers and commodity markets) and other nations.” Sokolski’s concern about the economic risks that Iran poses to commerce highlights the point that the market, which according to the neoliberal logic benefits every individual, is what needs to be insured through preemption. Thus, the insurance against terrorism is used not just to protect the “international community” but also to safeguard global

capitalism, with a promise of freedom and profit for each individual as *homo oeconomicus*. For the “experts” who acted as liberal democracy’s insurance brokers, Weblogistan became an apt site for this business. Weblogistan’s inhabitants became the risky subjects who are at once trained in democracy (to reduce the risk of terrorism) and deemed disposable (for posing the threat of terrorism).

Politics of Rightful Killing: Killing Me Softly with Your Rights

If the power of normalization wishes to exercise the old sovereign right to kill, it must become racist. And if, conversely, a power of sovereignty, or in other words, a power that has the right of life and death, wishes to work with the instruments, mechanisms, and technology of normalization, it too must be racist.

— MICHEL FOUCAULT, *SOCIETY MUST BE DEFENDED*

On July 8, 2008, toward the end of my fieldwork, an Associated Press reporter asked Senator John McCain (then a presidential candidate) why, despite sanctions against Iran, U.S. cigarette exports to Iran grew more than tenfold during President Bush’s presidency. McCain responded, “Maybe that’s a way of killing them.”²⁴ Less than a year later, McCain would be paying a tribute to Neda Agha Soltan—a bystander who was shot during the protests that followed the Iranian presidential elections in Tehran in June 2009—condemning the Iranian state for repressing the Iranian people’s quest for democracy, applauding Twitter and Google for making the video of Agha Soltan’s death viral, and advocating U.S. support for democracy in Iran.²⁵ Soon after, Congress approved allocating \$120 million for anti-regime broadcasting in Iran (Hivos 2011). President Obama’s administration established Near East Regional Democracy (NERD) in 2009 to focus “primarily on activities that don’t require an in-country presence. This included a strong focus on the support for media, technology, and Internet freedom, as well as conferences and trainings for Iranian reformers that may take place outside Iran.”²⁶ Of the \$40 million of NERD allocation in the fiscal year 2010, \$10 million was specified for “internet access and freedom” (Hivos 2011). In FY2013, \$8 million of the proposed \$30 million was designated to “defend and promote an open internet” (McInerny 2012). The centrality of the internet in U.S. “liberation” projects was also reflected in Obama’s 2012 Iranian New Year address, in which he celebrated Facebook, Twitter, and other internet social networking

tools for connecting Iranians and Americans: “The United States will continue to draw attention to the electronic curtain that is cutting the Iranian people off from the world. And we hope that others will join us in advancing a basic freedom for the Iranian people: the freedom to connect with one another, and with their fellow human beings.”²⁷

The U.S. government’s efforts to “lift the electronic curtain” in Iran while imposing the harshest sanctions in the history of sanctions on the Iranian people seems paradoxical at best. On July 1, 2010, President Obama signed into law the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act of 2010 (CISADA) to amend the Iran Sanctions Act of 1996 (ISA).²⁸ CISADA added new types of restrictions that Obama proudly announced to be crippling the Iranian economy.²⁹ The new sanctions imposed excruciating economic pressure on the Iranian population—especially the working class—and jeopardized many people’s lives by making lifesaving medicine unaffordable.³⁰ Ironically, the Obama administration added several provisions to make “it easier for American businesses to provide software and services into Iran that will make it easier for the Iranian people to use the internet.”³¹ How does one explain this aporia where the production of desire for free and democratic life is intertwined with death? What can be said about the politics of death and killing, management of life through rights, and the affective deployment of freedom in cyberspace? How do the material effects of sanctions and military intervention complicate the celebratory accounts of internet revolutions and affective mobilizations online? If mainstream representations of Weblogistan depict it as the bastion of civil society and therefore the realm of rights, what can be said about cyber civil society and rights in relation to death and disposability?

This inconsistency of the U.S. policies toward Iran delineates the position that Iran holds in a militant neoliberal order, wherein the Iranian population is seen as a desiring consumer of both commodities and liberal ideals of freedom in global capitalism, while the dispensability of Iranian lives is sanctioned in the name of security. As a trope and a fetish, “Iranian people” has been deployed by different political groups and states as a way to establish claims over legitimacy. The distinction that is often made between the “people” and the “government” is crystallized in the U.S. politicians’ statements of support for the “Iranian people” who are positioned against the Islamic government. Regardless of the strategic deployment of this distinction—whether by neoconservatives for whom the production and protection of the “Iranian people” as a population in need of liberation is an excuse for military intervention,

or by antiwar activists who are hopeful that through this distinction they can prevent a military attack on Iran—the fact remains that when the sovereign decides to kill, slowly with cigarettes or with sanctions, or swiftly in a manner of shock and awe, this differentiation becomes meaningless.

Given that biopolitics uses the production, management, and optimization of life of the population, the question becomes this: which populations are worth saving? Foucault defines population not as “a collection of juridical subjects in an individual or collective relationship with a sovereign will” but rather as “a set of elements in which we can note constants and regularities even in accidents, in which we can identify the universal of desire regularly producing the benefit of all, and with regard to which we can identify a number of modifiable variables on which it depends” (2007, 74). As such, the education of individual desire to produce collective interest is the organizing element of a population.³² According to Foucault, desire is the “mainspring of action” of the population, meaning that the regulated play of individual desire will allow the production of collective interests, thus pointing to both the naturalness of population and the artificiality of its management (73).

One can expand Foucault’s myopic notion of population and ask whether the universal of desire produces collective interests for all populations alike. How is the desire for freedom and democracy naturalized as one that benefits the collective interests of the “international civil society”? And if the work of governmentality is to cultivate a liberal democratic future for all, what happens to the excess of the art of governmentality—the queered nonliberal “terrorist” who poses a risk to the manufactured desire for liberal democracy and endangers the security of the “international community”? In other words, is the category of biopolitics sufficient for analyzing the “global” division of populations into those whose lives are produced and managed, sometimes under the rhetoric of “our way of life,” and those whose lives become disposable, not necessarily by the juridical sovereign power of the state but by international entities and transnational market-driven actors that constitute the “international civil society”?

Achille Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics, which focuses more on the significance given to death in relation to human bodies and their inscription in the order of power, is helpful in answering these questions (2003, 12). While expanding on Foucault’s biopolitics, Mbembe theorizes necropolitics through a critique of the Hegelian negative relationship between death and becoming a subject. Drawing on Georges Bataille’s theory of sovereignty and death,

Mbembe defines politics as the work of death and rightly points out that upholding the work of death is not the necessary prerequisite for subjecthood (2003, 14–16). Using examples of slaves in plantations and the colonized in the colonies, where the absolute lawlessness stems from the denial of humanity to the “native” and where the violence of the state of exception is exercised in the name of civilization, Mbembe (à la Agamben) argues that the state of exception and the state of siege become the normative basis of the right to kill (16). Mbembe points out that the modern colonial occupation combines the disciplinary, the biopolitical, and the necropolitical (the current example Mbembe argues is the occupation of Palestine). He argues that the “*stage of siege* is itself a military institution. It allows a modality of killing that does not distinguish between the external and the internal enemy. Entire populations are the target of the sovereign” (30).

Mbembe’s analysis is an important intervention in the scope and the relevance of the biopolitical in the colonial context. His intervention expands biopolitics and points to Foucault’s blind spot in theorizing the politics of life and death in the context of colonial occupation. However, neither biopolitics nor necropolitics may be sufficient to explain the work of death in relation to populations that are not stripped of rights in the state of exception (Agamben 2005) but whose deaths are sanctioned, rather, in the name of rights and in the state of normalcy. I build from biopolitics and necropolitics to suggest a form of power over the liminal state between death and life: a life that is not bare, but is instead imbued with rights. As a trope, the “people of Iran” constitute a population that is produced through the discourse of rights and for which death through sanctions and/or bombs is legitimized within the rhetoric of the “war on terror.” I call the politics of death in relationship to an unstable life that is at once imbued with and stripped of liberal universal rights *the politics of rightful killing*. The politics of rightful killing explains the contemporary political situation in the “war on terror” where those, such as the “people of Iran,” whose rights and protection are presented as the *raison d’être* of war, are sanctioned to death and therefore live a pending death exactly because of, and in the name of, those rights. Foucault argues that while “the relationship of war” (“If you want to live, the other must die”) is not new, modern racism makes this relationship “function in a way that is completely new and that is quite compatible with the exercise of biopolitics” (2003, 255). During the “war on terror,” the management and optimization of protected life (populations that are worth protecting) uphold national and international security as a justification for racism. The exercise of racism in the name of

democracy entails biopolitical practices at home and abroad, as well as preemptive disposability of those who threaten “our way of life” or jeopardize the interests of the “international community.” Democratization (through trainings in the realm of civil society) and protection of rights (through the work of the “international civil society”) become preemptive strategies to contain the risk of terrorism in populations that are not fully redeemable and remain suspect. As such, strategies of preemption/redemption can be revamped as strategies of killing unapologetically and with no need for justification. The politics of rightful killing is also concerned with the techniques of killing of populations: the management of death on the threshold of life. How does the government of the life of one population connect to the techniques of the killing of other populations? This is not to repeat the important point that Foucault and Mbembe (drawing from Foucault) address, namely “civilized” ways of killing and disciplining. It is to address the technique of killing of different populations, different multitudes, where the sovereign kills softly with selective sanctions (cigarettes are allowed; medicine is not), or in the manner of shock and awe, all in the name of rights.

The politics of rightful killing does not replace necropolitics or biopolitics, but it exists in the same political terrain where populations are disciplined, normalized, and debilitated (Puar 2017) and where “bare life” (one that is stripped of rights in the state of exception) is subjected to death. It refers to the necessary correlate of biopolitics insofar as biopolitics encompasses the relationship of the life of one depending on the death of the other (Foucault 2003, 255). Like necropolitics, however, the politics of rightful killing addresses the insufficiency of biopolitics in accounting for contemporary configurations of politics of life and death and is concerned with the *living dead*, the population that lives on the threshold of life and death (Mbembe 2003, 40). Unlike the living dead, however, *loaned life* (*zendegiye nessiyeh*) addresses the coexistence of dreaded yet rightful life and impending death on the same plane. Neither bare life, nor the life of the shadow slave or that of the absolute enemy (as discussed by Giorgio Agamben in the death camps and Mbembe in the colonies, the plantations, and in Palestine), loaned life is killable not just in the exceptional state of emergency, state of lawlessness, or the state of siege—although it is legitimized under those states—but in the state of normalcy. Rather than being completely stripped of rights, *loaned life* is imbued with and indebted to (universal human) rights. Rather than Foucault’s formulation of biopolitics (“make live, let die”) or Puar’s formulation of debilitation (“will not let die”), the loaned life in the politics of rightful killing encapsulates the

conditional life of the population that has the potential to be democratized *and* contains the risk of terrorism. It is loaned, as it is conditional and contingent on the form of life (make live *only if* life aligns with the tenets of liberal democracy) and the temporality of rights (make live *only as long as* gifted with rights). Unlike *homo sacer*, loaned life cannot be expended by anyone except for the liberalizing states that protect the life-worthy population (even as the life-worthy population is eliminating its internal dangers through racist technologies of government). The *loaned life* holds the promise of civil society, and thus the potential of being governed transnationally, while being prone to preemptive death for the risk that it contains. In the endless state of war against the “terrorist states,” a new norm is established where the loaned life becomes the target of the sovereign’s right to kill in the name of rights and the protection of the “international civil society.”

The analysis of Weblogistan as a site of civil society needs to be contextualized in relation to risk, danger, security, and, ultimately, the politics of rightful killing during the “war on terror.” During the “war on terror,” when experts produce Middle Eastern and Muslim populations as risks to the safety of the “international civil society,” surveillance as well as lessons in democracy through the internet may be deployed as risk-reduction technologies. The critique of surveillance in cyberspace is often framed as the violation of individual rights and liberties, thus enshrining the sovereignty of individuals and their freedom of association in civil society. Yet the surveillance of entire populations in cyberspace is often justified in the name of security and protection of the individual. It is in this context that the Iranian population is figured as one that needs protection against censorship and human rights violations of the Iranian “regime” and is simultaneously seen as killable in the name of rights. In other words, Weblogistan is implicated in the politics of rightful killing that characterizes the paradoxical situation wherein campaigns for internet freedom exist side by side with deadly economic sanctions.

New Directions in the Studies of the Middle Eastern Cyberspace

While my ethnography in Weblogistan delves into the world of Persian blogging in order to explore the role of militarism, “democratization,” and neoliberal governmentality in the Iranian cyberspace, the book’s insights may be relevant to the new normative language of digital citizenship and political engagement

in many parts of the world, including in Southwest Asia and North Africa (the region that for its geopolitical significance has arbitrarily been named the “Middle East”). Of course, claims about “internet revolutions” are not unique to Iran. Nor are the monetary and geopolitical investments in the internet as a vehicle for surveillance and neocolonial practices that are guised under the cloak of democratization obsolete. The internet has been deployed as the “new frontier” for liberalizing projects that in practice normalize the violence of “freedom.” The transnational circulation of mediated images and online news reproduces epistemic violence and carries out the task of mobilizing affect to justify preemptive militarism. For instance, the widely circulated YouTube videos of Saddam Hussein’s hanging after Iraq’s “liberation” and of the sodomizing and killing of Muammar Gaddafi by NATO-supported “Libyan rebels” became violent spectacles for a networked world. These displays of “global justice” on cyber-pages were reminders that despite internet enthusiasts’ claims about the disembodiment of cyberspace, the punishment and torture of the enemy are broadcast electronically with little or no delay and felt painfully by many who have bodily memories of the violence perpetuated by the U.S.-supported dictatorships and wars in the Middle East. Graphic videos of executions of despotic dictators (once allies to the executors of “justice”) juxtapose the primitive apparatus of punishment with the modern technology that transmits these images in a matter of seconds across space, thus reminding *us*, the seemingly disembodied netizens of the civilized world, that *their* present and democratic future is *our* past, that liberation through military intervention is simply not enough for the barbaric brutal Muslim.³³ Lessons in democracy and freedom are necessary for the taming of the “liberated” yet backward Muslim populations. And while military presence in the name of “peacekeeping” is legitimized (because “they” are too irrational and therefore ungovernable), “teaching democracy” through the internet becomes an indispensable part of the freedom projects. The internet renders freedom viral.

It is no accident that immediately following the occupation of Iraq, Spirit of America,³⁴ a nonprofit/nongovernmental organization chaired by Senator McCain, created the software “Arabic Blogging Tools” to give “voice to those working for freedom and democracy in the Arab world and [to] enable them to easily connect and share ideas with their peers.” The blogging tools carried out a project that its creators called “viral freedom.” According to Spirit of America, “viral freedom” managed blogs that used the blogging tools in order to transmit the messages of this organization. Every blog that used the Arabic Blogging Tools included “a space that [was] under the control of

organizations that we [Spirit of America] work with, such as Friends of Democracy.”³⁵ Referred to as “real estate,” this section on every blog that used the Arabic Blogging Tools was designed to promote “groups, individuals and news that, in the big picture, advance freedom, democracy and peace in the region.” Not surprisingly, Spirit of America created an internet freedom and democracy project specifically designed to train Iraqi women, who were assumed to have had no experience of freedom previous to the occupation of Iraq. This liberating mission viewed the internet as a tool for democratization in Iraq and claimed that each Iraqi “who creates a blog is promoting moderate and progressive information and viewpoints in the Arab world. . . . Friends of Democracy uses the space to publicize prodemocracy groups, election information and related news. The blogs created under Friends of Democracy are ambassadors of democracy in the Arab world.”³⁶ Shortly after the implementation of internet democracy-training projects in “postliberation” Iraq, the United States focused on internet propaganda in Iran. During the Bush administration, more than \$400 million was allocated to fund covert operations and support regime change in Iran (Hivos 2011).³⁷ The official U.S. propaganda media, Voice of America Persian television and Radio Farda (Radio “Future”), became the main recipients of the U.S. Department of State funding. To appeal to the young Iranian population and to be “up to date,” these state-funded media turned to Weblogistan for news and staffing.

In a sense, the “blogging revolution” can be seen as one of the first “internet revolutions” in a series of events that were hailed as the “Twitter revolution” or the “Facebook revolution” in Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt, and other parts of the Middle East.³⁸ These “internet revolutions” show that when democratic movements are hijacked and deployed by the “liberating” forces in the service of digital neocolonial projects (as I will discuss in this book), the result may very well be the suppression of these movements, not least because of the incitement of the discourse of “national security” by the so-called authoritarian regimes. It is in the online and offline wars between the “authoritarian” and “democratizing” regimes that the lives of the protesters are jeopardized and deemed disposable. Not unlike the Iranian context, the hype around “internet revolutions” in Arab countries elides the long histories of struggle while obscuring the relationship among “digital democratization,” militarism, and security.³⁹

While many scholars are optimistic about the role of blogging and social media in the social movements in the Middle East (Jarvis 2011; Lynch 2007; Shirky 2011; Ulrich 2009), others have argued that the uncritical celebrations

of “internet revolutions” in Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, and other locations have elided a long history of struggle that led to the protests (Alexander and Aouragh 2011, 2014; Badr 2018; Iskander 2011; Morozov 2012; Ulrich 2009). Furthermore, the utopian accounts of internet democracy and internet revolutions assume that the new media technologies’ accelerated speed overcomes physical distance, bridging social, political, and economic gaps.⁴⁰ As Barnett (2004, 59) argues, “the celebration of the new technologies like the Internet as ideal for direct plebiscitary democracy, or for the proliferation of subterranean resistance networks, assumes that democracy is primarily about the expression of personal preferences or group interests outside of any context of transformative, deliberative justification.” Highlighting the materiality of space and time and the role of transnational networks and resources in the emergence of publics, Barnett draws our attention to both the spaces that the uses of new media open up and the production of material infrastructure that enables technological developments.

Some of the optimistic accounts about the revolutionary potentials of the internet are informed by the hypertext theory and its use of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of rhizome as multiplicitous, nonhierarchical, heterogeneous, rapturous, and a-centered. Adopting the concepts in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987), several studies of the internet in the 1990s (*The Electronic Disturbance* 1994; Landow 1994, 1997; Martin 1996; Moulthrop 1995; Snyder 1997) maintain that internet networks challenge the arborescent hierarchal structures, engendering “lines of flight” and bringing hope for liberation from structures of power.⁴¹ Enthusiastic accounts of the internet that interpret Deleuze and Guattari’s notions of war machine, nomad, and rhizome as tactics of resistance to domination see hacktivism that leaves no trace as nomadic resistance (Rosenberg 1994, 288).⁴² Ignoring the U.S. military origins of the internet, in their uncritical celebration of multiplicity and lack of origins, these accounts assume the internet to have started as a “smooth space.” State and capital are assumed to have only re-territorialized the rhizomatic internet later, slowly making it into a hierarchal, panoptic, and striated space. Even if the monopoly of U.S. surveillance and capital over the internet is acknowledged, some of these accounts insist that if power has become nomadic and networked, resistance must become rhizomatic and nomadic.

In their books *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004), Hardt and Negri, drawing from Foucault, as well as from Deleuze and Guattari, claim that in the age of empire, when war has become the norm, biopower—which seeks

to control populations while producing life—also produces the networks that hold the possibility of democracy. Multitude, they state, as a set of rhizomatic processes, contains the possibility of absolute democracy.⁴³ For Hardt and Negri, multitude is the global subject of absolute democracy. As capital uses global communication technologies to exploit the labor market globally, it produces mobile and hybrid subjects, who are no longer limited to the national boundaries but constitute the new political subject: the multitude that is the force behind the self-organizing decentralized democracy.⁴⁴ Hardt and Negri remain faithful to freedom and pure resistance through the binary logic of revolution, where the constituent power contests the constituted power through exodus. Yet in their enthusiasm about the revolutionary power of multitude and their humanist belief in the power of human creativity and innovation, they ignore the fact that the multitude itself is biopolitically mediated.⁴⁵ Somehow the multitude and its desires stay pure, as if not implicated in the national and transnational networks that enable the hegemonic power of the empire. If the empire cannot be dethroned through countering global capitalism, it can be contested by the multitude through “subtraction, a flight, an exodus from sovereignty” (2004, 341).⁴⁶

Celebrations of the internet’s potential for democratizations are not limited to the analyses of rhizomatic multitude. The redistribution of political influence and “political voice” is often presented as the internet’s exceptional capability for deliberative and participatory democracy. As Matthew Hindman (2009) argues, such valorizations assume political equality online, thus omitting gatekeeping and infrastructural inequalities. Hindman suggests that even if the digital divide has decreased with more internet accessibility, the internet is not eliminating exclusivity in the political realm, as gatekeeping remains a reality because of social media design and search engine algorithms (13–19). While the seemingly equal access to social media may give the impression of egalitarianism, the readership reproduces political hierarchies (16–19). Paolo Gerbaudo (2012) further challenges the valorization of the decentralized character of “networks” and the faithful optimism of “swarms” theorized by scholars such as Castells (2009, 2015) and Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004), arguing that social media have enabled the rise of “soft” forms of leadership which exploit the interactive and participatory character of the new communication technologies” (Gerbaudo 2012, 139).⁴⁷

I build on and contribute to critiques of digital democracy, and what Jodi Dean (2005) has aptly called “technology fetishism,” by focusing on the notion

of cyber civil society and its relationship to biopolitics, necropolitics, and geopolitics in internet democratization projects.⁴⁸ In other words, this book refrains from valorizing the promise and possibility of a liberal and democratic future through “internet revolutions,” as this promise is contingent on the killability of those who pose a threat to the security of the “international civil society.” While the “war on terror” has seemingly ended, the present moment is marked by wars and military occupations in the Middle East, the threat of a military attack on Iran, and security discourses and practices that deem the Middle East and Middle Eastern immigrants and refugees in North America and Europe as risks to national and global security (Naber 2006). Even as the internet enables political organizing, “information revolutions” through internet technologies continue the cold war logic and the U.S. interventions in the Middle East under the rhetoric of democratization. As I discussed above, the digital realm since the 1990s (with the popularization of internet-mediated social media) has become a significant site of transnational neoliberal governmentality. Whether theorized as an element of the “human security state” (Amar 2013) or a characteristic of “advanced neoliberalism” (Grewal 2017), national security has become the *sine qua non* for the state suppression of social movements. The need for expertise continues to provide online entrepreneurship opportunities for “native informants” during a time when U.S. military intervention in the Middle East is more pervasive than before. In this milieu, when populations are subjected to debilitation and disposability, the analyses of civil society, resistance, and revolution in digital realms cannot afford to ignore the geopolitical.

Needless to say, this book does not claim to provide a full account of the use of the internet among Iranians in Iran and its diaspora. Despite the fast development of internet technologies, like any ethnographic account this research is limited by its temporal and spatial specificity. While the trend in studies of the internet is to produce scholarship about the newest technological advances caused by the fast pace of internet technologies, I resist the modernist impulse and the amnesiac tempo that fixates on the “new.” I hope to counter the hasty enthusiasm in technocentric accounts that is informed by a linear progressive temporality and the colonial desire for expeditions in “new frontiers.” In other words, this ethnography dwells in Weblogistan in the first decade of the new millennium, when blogging by Iranians was celebrated as a tool of democratization during the “war on terror.” However, considering the currency of discourses of liberation in the language of digital citizenship, this book may offer some insights for the current political atmosphere.

Chapter Summaries

In the first chapter of this book, “Weblogistan and the Iranian Diaspora: Nation and Its Re-territorializations in Cyberspace,” I introduce Weblogistan by discussing conventions of Persian-language blogging, representations of Weblogistan as a liberalizing technology in Iran, and the role of diasporic bloggers in the world of Persian blogging. I show that rehearsals of democracy and the desire for exceptional citizenship in Weblogistan were necessarily implicated in nationalist discourses that produced a heteronormative and homogenous image of Iranianness against Iran’s internal and external others. Despite the nationalist displays of Iranianness through market virility and whiteness in the United States, the desire for exceptional citizenship is rendered impossible for the desiring Iranian subject, because Iranianness is overdetermined as a contagious risk.

In chapter 2, “Civil Society (*jaame’è-ye madani*), Soccer, and Gendered Politics in Weblogistan: The 2005 Presidential Election,” I discuss the notion of civil society in the Iranian political context and argue that while Iranian cyberspace (including blogs) has expanded transnational Iranian civil society by enabling faster communication between a certain group of middle-class Iranians in Iran and their counterparts in diaspora, the Iranian civil society is neither new nor a gift granted by internet technologies. By considering Weblogistan as an element of transnational Iranian civil society, I do not intend to celebrate civil society as a site of consensus and debate or to glorify the internet as an emancipatory technology. On the contrary, I show that Weblogistan is where gendered inequalities surface and where women are excluded from the realm of “proper politics.” The online and offline reactions to women bloggers who voted in the presidential election and the encounters among women activists/bloggers, reformist men, and secular diaspora opposition groups and individuals demonstrate how blogger women activists were often caught between discourses of liberation that legitimized imperialism and nationalist discourses that used women as markers of national pride. The figure of the woman activist in Weblogistan as para-human (Amar 2013)—a victim in need of rescue and protection, and also a menacing figure who poses a risk to national security—constitutes a risky subject (Patel 2006) whose vulnerability sanctions violence in the name of protection and whose loaned life is subjected to the politics of rightful killing.

In chapter 3, “Whores, Homos, and Feminists: Weblogistan’s Anti-modern Others,” I discuss Weblogistan as a site of cybergovernmentality where gendered

subjects are disciplined and normalized under the rhetoric of “practicing democracy” and through the “conduct of the conduct” of others and “technologies of self.” Following Aihwa Ong’s assertion (2006) that the ethics of citizenship and governing of populations is increasingly concerned with individual self-management according to moral codes, I argue that the normalization of language in Weblogistan is deployed to regulate individual bloggers’ conduct according to the codes of heteronormative monogamy and democratic futurity. The proper subjects of Weblogistan are those who aspire to an exceptional citizenship and a democratic futurity that purges its unwanted excess: the backward and unstable woman. Unlike the desiring subject who aspires to exceptional citizenship, the untamed Iranian woman who crosses lines of civility is the excess of the art of normalization. No longer redeemable under the rhetoric of gendered victimhood, her death is sanctioned in the name of national security and democratic futurity.

In chapter 4, “Weblogistan and Its Homosexual Problem,” I show that performances of modern citizenship in Weblogistan repeat heteronormative nationalist discourses alongside the neoliberal discourses of freedom and democracy. By discussing the debates around homosexuality, I argue that despite the idealization of Weblogistan as a new platform for democratic inclusion, nationalist imaginations of Iranianness often exclude queers. At best, in a competition to envision a democratic future in the market for democratization, intellectual bloggers who strived to prove their modernity advocated tolerance (with a limit) for homosexuals. This tolerance was contingent on homonormative notions of sexual identity that reified a heterosexual and homosexual binary and reiterated heteronormative nationalism through condemning sexualities that were deemed to be unethical or inauthentic. As such, the *chic of queer* in Weblogistan stemmed from the desire for a particular Iranian modernity and exceptional citizenship that valorized freedom and democracy and produced universalized sexual and homogenous national identities, while simultaneously emphasizing sexual and racial difference. Through discussing representations of queer death, I show that while white queers are folded into life as exceptional citizens who die heroic deaths, others become representable in life or death only as victims of Islamic homophobia. Even as some Iranian queers desire exceptional citizenship through proximity to whiteness, neoliberal entrepreneurship, embodiment of sanitized homosexuality, and the rejection of Islam, the Iranian population at large becomes racially queered and disposable.

In chapter 5, “The War Machine, Neoliberal *Homo Economicus*, and the Experts,” I discuss the production of expertise and its relationship to neo-

liberal self-entrepreneurship in Weblogistan during the “war on terror.” The empire-building project is connected to neoliberal practices and discourses that produce entrepreneurial blogger subjects who are disciplined—and discipline themselves and others—according to the gendered and sexed norms of freedom, democracy, and the market. I contextualize the production of the neoliberal self-entrepreneur blogger in relation to the politics of democratization during the “war on terror” through a number of key sites: a documentary film about Weblogistan, a radio program that was launched as the radio of Weblogistan, and a conference that featured liberalization through blogging. Through these examples I argue that while blogger self-entrepreneurs as the war machine became “soldiers of freedom” in the market for information during the “war on terror,” they were easily disposable and replaceable once they lost their political usefulness and posed a threat to the internet democratization projects.

In the coda, I discuss the 2009 “Twitter revolution” and the 2018 arrests of the “Instagram girls” and argue that the celebrations of social media mobilizations through hashtags that reduce dissent to “sexual revolution” elide the conditions that render the Iranian population killable. The hype around “internet revolution,” censorship, freedom of speech, and the mobilizations of civil society in social media overshadows the sanctions and the pending war that subject the Iranian population to the politics of rightful killing. Rather than an optimism that seeks potentiality in bare life, I suggest pessimism as the possibility of transformative politics.