

# *Amir Tataloo, Beyond Resistance and Propaganda:* **The Appropriation of Iranian Rap Music and the Negotiation of its Legality**

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## Introduction

No one knows about Amir Tataloo.

**B**ahman Ghobadi's film *No One Knows About Persian Cats* (2009) could be seen as a dynamic and thrilling introduction to Iranian popular music: two rock musicians form a band and run around Tehran, desperately looking for a way to leave the country. Many Iranian musicians, however, criticised the film's sensationalist representation of the popular music scene, stating that it greatly exaggerated the danger they face in order to depict them as victims of an oppressive regime.<sup>1</sup>

The rapper Amir Tataloo, too, has been subject to an overly politicised portrayal, failing to be considered as a complex figure by the media and in scholarship. I first became aware of Tataloo's music when I came across his video *Energy Hasteei* [Nuclear Energy], in which he sings in support of the Iranian nuclear program on board a navy ship. At the time, I was interested in the intersections between rap and politics in Iran, and had never before heard any rap songs in support of the government. I was intrigued as to what led Tataloo to produce the music video—was he coerced into making it, or perhaps rewarded with a small fortune? My further research did not provide answers to these questions. His story only became increasingly confusing: in May 2017, he appeared in a high-profile meeting

with current president Ebrahim Raisi, but only three years later, in January 2020, Iranian judicial authorities requested that Interpol issue a 'red alert' for his arrest in Turkey 'for spreading corruption'.<sup>2</sup>

With each article, whether from news outlets or academic journals, it was difficult to gain any real sense of who Amir Tataloo was. It appeared that Tataloo the person, the rapper, could not be disentangled from his relations to the Iranian government. Writers seemed only able to view him through the distorted lenses of resistance or propaganda: he has generally been portrayed either as an illegal party rapper, fighting against the autocratic government, or as a mere pawn of the Iranian regime's propaganda centres.

In this article, I aim to look beyond the reductionist binaries that often dominate discussions of popular music and power in Iran (anti- vs. pro-regime, liberal vs. hardliner) and present a more multifaceted perspective of rap music's significance in Iranian politics. Looking at this music scene through the figure of Tataloo provides a deeper understanding of its evolution in the last few years, how social media has impacted the genre, and the ways in which rap's legality is constantly under negotiation.

The main body of this paper is divided into two sections. The first section explores the evolution of Tataloo's image and artistry through three music videos: *Energy Hasteei* [Nuclear Energy], *Shohada*

<sup>1</sup> Theresa Parvin Steward, *I Am the Brave Hero and this Land is Mine: Popular Music and Youth Identity in Post-revolutionary Iran* (University of Edinburgh 2013) 22-130.

<sup>2</sup> 'Iranian Rapper Tataloo Reportedly Arrested in Turkey' (RFERL, 28 January 2020) <<https://www.rferl.org/a/iranian-rapper-arrested-in-turkey-tehran-authorities-say/30402470.html>> accessed 12 June 2022.

[Martyrs], and *Jahanam* [Hell]. The stark contrast between each video's discourse and artistic choices highlights the need for more complex portrayals of Tataloo, depictions that consider the significance of these works for the rapper and his career. In addition, I argue that scholars and journalists, in their focus on the political messages in the first and second videos, funded by the Revolutionary Guard, have omitted an important perspective. An analysis of these videos' aesthetic elements reveals two noteworthy processes taking place: an appropriation and sanitisation of conventional hip-hop tropes for the purpose of propaganda, as well as a clear improvement in the artistry of rap music videos.

The second section considers what Tataloo's career and interactions with several branches of the Iranian government can reveal about the legitimisation of rap music in Iran. I explore the main arenas on which the negotiation of rap's legality can play out, and identify the principal stakeholders and agents of influence in this process.

### Amir Tataloo – Background

Amir Tataloo is the stage name chosen by Amirhossein Maghsoudloo; a popular but controversial Iranian rapper considered part of the first generation of the Iranian underground hip-hop scene. The musician was born in Tehran on September 21, 1987. He started singing pop music at the age of 17 in 1998 and, in 2003, set up a blog where he would publish his compositions.<sup>3</sup>

Tataloo's career began as an illegal 'underground' rapper, directly criticising the government for not providing him with a legal outlet for his music. He has repeatedly sought to obtain official licenses for the release of his music from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, but to no avail. Indeed, to this day, very few rap albums have ever been approved by the Ministry for official release.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, Tataloo chose to publish all his music online.<sup>5</sup>

On three separate occasions, the rapper has been detained at the orders of Iranian authorities: 2013, 2016 and 2020. In December 2013, Tataloo was briefly arrested by the Iranian *gash-t-e ershad* [morality police] on charges of cooperating with foreign satellite news channels<sup>6</sup>. The rapper was arrested for a second time in 2016 on charges of '*tashviq be fesad u fahshā*' [encouraging corruption and prostitution].<sup>7</sup> It was later revealed that the cause of his arrest was an audio file posted to his Instagram, which led to Tataloo being charged with several crimes, such as insulting a government official, *qazf* [accusing someone of adultery or sodomy], and inciting threats.<sup>8</sup> Finally, in January 2020, Tataloo was arrested for a third time by Turkish authorities in Istanbul, who stated that Interpol had issued a 'red notice' for him. This notice was reportedly issued by Iranian

judicial authorities who accused him of 'encouraging citizens, especially young people, to use drugs, especially psychotropic drugs, and for spreading corruption'.<sup>9</sup>

Having once held the most followed account on Instagram, Tataloo also broke several other records on social media, such as the most comments on a single Instagram post: 18 million<sup>10</sup>, and the most viewed live broadcast on Instagram: 626,000 views.<sup>11</sup> The rapper, in the court session during his first arrest, suddenly stood up and stated: '*nemi tavānid harkāri mi khāhid bā man bekonid; man milionhā havadār dāram*' [You can't do whatever you want with me; I have millions of fans].<sup>12</sup> After his arrest in 2016, his fans took to social media to defend him and demand his release, posting 700,000 comments on Instagram, including on the accounts of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, saying that musicians do not belong in jail. According to the data recorded by the users themselves on Twitter, these reactions came from two age groups: 13 to 17 years old and 18 to 24 years old.<sup>13</sup>

The rapper's immense popularity on social media has allowed him to explore a space in which he can express himself freely, uninhibited by most of the cultural and political restrictions facing musicians living in Iran. Tataloo's unofficial online releases, which have been published and shared endlessly on social media apps such as Telegram and Instagram, essentially sidestep the state's official cultural institutions. The public forums and comment sections which surround these releases represent a worryingly opaque space for hardline Iranian authorities, where fiery young people could possibly gather to chat about subversive beliefs or to 'spread corruption'.

Overall, Tataloo occupies a highly contested position in Iranian society. The rapper's most ardent fans refer to themselves as '*tataliti*' [Tatalites], and have written a 500-page fan book compiling his biography, transcribed interviews and his complete lyrics. They follow certain rituals inspired by their idol, such as the '*dure-ye pāki*' [period of purity]: fourteen days in which fans should not eat or smoke, sin or have relationships with the opposite sex, and should exercise daily. Tataloo even designed a flag for his fans.<sup>14</sup> As a result of the near-zealotry of his fans, he has been perceived as a cult leader or as a fraudster who exploits the vulnerability of adolescents.<sup>15</sup>

## Literature Review

### Popular music and politics in Iran

The relationship between music and politics in Iran is a complex tapestry, in which several interweaving power structures have varying degrees of influence over music's permissibility, making the

3 Mohammad Fowladi, *Hell & Purgatory* (Tatality.com, January 2020) 16–17.

4 Laudan Nooshin, 'Hip-Hop Tehran: Migrating Styles, Musical Meanings, Marginalized Voices' in Byron Dueck and Jason Toynbee (eds), *Migrating Music* (Routledge 2011) 99.

5 Fowladi (n 3) 16–17.

6 'Amir Tataloo *khanānde-ye irāni bāzdāshd shod*' [Iranian Singer Amir Tataloo Was Arrested] (*BBC Persian*, 3 December 2013).

7 'Amir Tataloo *be etehām-e 'tashviq be fesad u fahshā' bāzdāshd shod*' [Amir Tataloo Was Arrested on Charges of 'Encouraging Corruption and Prostitution'] (*Voa News*, 25 August 2016).

8 'Barresi-ye hoquqi-ye anāvein-e etehāmi-ye Amir Tataloo' [Legal Investigation of the Accusatory Topics of Amir Tataloo] (*JameJamOnline*, 3 September 2016).

9 *RFERL* (n 2).

10 'Rekord-e tāze-ye Tataloo dar Instagram' [Tataloo's New Record on Instagram] (*Radio Farda*, 4 September 2019).

11 Fern Taghizadeh, 'Live-e Instagram dar qarantiye; az sargarmi va āmūzesh tā sokhanrāni va mosābehe' [Instagram Lives in Quarantine; From Entertainment and Education to Lectures and Interviews] (*BBC Persian*, 13 April 2020).

12 'Mored-e ajib-e Tataloo u tatalitihā' [The Strange Case of Tataloo and Tatalites] (*ISNA*, 28 August 2016).

13 'Talāsh-e tatalitihā' [The Endeavours of Tatalites] (*BBC Persian*, 2 September 2016).

14 Fowladi (n 3) 17, 72.

15 'Jomhuri-ye tatalitihā' [The Republic of Tatalites] (*Radio Zamaneh*, 29 August 2016); 'Tasir-e tatalihā dar tartib-e nojavānān' [The Impact of Tatalites on Adolescents] (*Farhang News*, 11 September 2016).

latter exist in a constant state of negotiation. Rap music, which is the focus of this article, stands in marked contrast to other genres of popular music: rappers are very rarely granted a license from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, without which it is illegal for any musician to record or release music.

Tataloo's pigeonholing in scholarship as either a protest rapper or a pawn of Iran's propaganda centres prevents us from understanding the implications of his unique position in Iranian society. Both Nooshin<sup>16</sup> and Semati<sup>17</sup> have drawn attention to the reductionist binaries which dominate discussions of popular music and power in Iran, with overly simplistic conceptions of hegemony and resistance, reformists and hardliners, modernity and tradition, etc.

Indeed, in their haste to view music through the lens of politics, scholars have missed something fundamental about music: its aesthetic value. Street<sup>18</sup> and Steward<sup>19</sup> stress the danger of looking at music purely through a political lens when, for many, it functions primarily as a source of aesthetic pleasure. Within the context of Persian cultural studies, this sentiment is echoed by Nooshin, who discusses the romanticisation of 'resistance' in representations of Iranian popular music.<sup>20</sup> In over-politicising music scenes in Iran, she argues that scholars disregard or push other equally important aspects of musical activities to the margins, and that this portrayal is more representative of the author's beliefs than the motivations of the musicians. The political fetishisation of musicians from the Middle East has also been discussed by Swedenburg<sup>21</sup> in relation to Palestinian musicians, who finds that their music is only appreciated if it fits within a narrative of Palestinian resistance.

The necessity of stepping beyond reductionist narratives of hegemony and resistance in interpretations of popular music is crucial to the analysis of Tataloo's music, motivations, and persona. Laachir and Talajooy's book, though centred around *Resistance in Middle Eastern Cultures*, compiles several convincing examples of how to surpass oversimplification in analyses of resistance.<sup>22</sup> Mozafari, for example, succeeds in conveying the resistance of solo female vocalists, a marginalised group in Iran, whilst still granting them agency.<sup>23</sup> By focusing on the social and professional implications of these musicians' strategies to resist censorship, Mozafari provides a multifaceted perspective of the significance of this form of resistance. The works cited above stand as the exception that proves the rule, revealing the gap in current scholarship of accounts of popular music that examine the differing motivations of musicians beyond the purely political.

16 Laudan Nooshin, 'Prelude: Power and the Play of Music' in Laudan Nooshin (ed), *Music and the Play of Power in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia* (Routledge 2009) 1-31.

17 Mehdi Semati. 'Sounds like Iran: On Popular Music of Iran' (2017) 15(3) *Popular Communication* 155-62.

18 John Street, 'Fight the Power: The Politics of Music and the Music of Politics' (2003) 38(1) *Government and Opposition* 113-30.

19 Steward (n 1).

20 Laudan Nooshin, 'Whose Liberation? Iranian Popular Music and the Fetishization of Resistance' (2017) 15(3) *Popular Communication* 163-91.

21 Ted Swedenburg, 'Palestinian Rap: Against the Struggle Paradigm' in Walid El Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman (eds), *Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa: A Postcolonial Outlook* (Routledge 2013) 17-32.

22 Karima Laachir and Saeed Talajooy (eds), *Resistance in Contemporary Middle Eastern Cultures: Literature, Cinema and Music* (Routledge 2013) 207-275.

23 Parnis Mozafari, 'Female Solo Singing in Post-Revolution Iran' (2013) in *ibid* 262-278.

## Iranian rap music

Beyond its subversive potential, there are several more aspects of rap music worthy of scholarly investigation. Ranjbar insists that all rap music in Iran should be considered oppositional due to its unofficial and highly contested nature, regardless of whether the lyrics of songs are political, however this assertion rests on the idea that rap music is entirely 'underground'.<sup>24</sup> This is a misleading and reductionist term which fails to account for the several occasions on which rap albums have been licensed by the Islamic Republic's Ministry of Culture, as early as 2003,<sup>25</sup> or on which rappers have collaborated with the state's media centres.<sup>26</sup> Although such examples are as of yet relatively uncommon, they problematise Ranjbar's clear-cut model of resistance and hegemony.

Few English-language works in scholarship supersede this binary in their analysis of rap lyrics. In Persian, however, some scholars treat the oppositional lyrics of rappers with more nuance. Goudarzi and Alvandi, whilst focusing on counter-hegemonic themes, reveal the numerous socio-economic topics tackled by rappers beyond the purely political: widespread poverty, unemployment, corruption, or addiction.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Kowsari and Mowlaei emphasise how Iranian rap music, in addition to being a marginal discourse in society, itself contains several dominant and marginal discourses; radical protest only constituting one of the nine discourses they identified. These discourses indicate several other lyrical themes worthy of scholarly investigation, notably feminism and hedonism.<sup>28</sup> Tataloo is acknowledged as one of the main rappers in the latter discourse, stressing the need to consider his position in Iranian society with an aesthetic angle, and from the perspective of his audience.

It is relevant to consider how Iranian rappers have been classified in scholarship, and whether Tataloo fits neatly into these categories. As I have already mentioned, Kowsari and Mowlaei grouped rappers into certain themes of discourse, based on an analysis of their song lyrics. The consensus, however, is that categorisation based on the goals and motivations of rappers is the most useful.<sup>29</sup> Johnston and Ranjbar divide these musicians into three categories: aggressive 'gangsta' rappers who break taboos, moralistic rappers who strive for social awareness and commercial 'pop' rappers. As Golpushnezhad<sup>30</sup> and Johnston<sup>28</sup> point out, however, the traditional distinction between 'political' and 'party' rappers is of limited use:

24 Morvarid Ranjbar, 'Emergent Culture: Iranian Rap Music as a Tool for Resistance' (Wilfrid Laurier University 2016) 50-57.

25 Nooshin (n 4) 99.

26 Narges Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Stanford University Press 2019) 99-106; Elham Golpushnezhad, 'Untold Stories of DIY/Underground Iranian Rap Culture: The Legitimization of Iranian Hip-Hop and the Loss of Radical Potential' (2018) 12(2) *Cultural Sociology* 271-73.

27 Mohsen Goudarzi and Alireza Alvandi, 'Musiqi be masabe-ye moqāvemati; mazamin-e kanterhezhemonik dar rap-e fārsi-irāni' [Music as Resistance; Counter-Hegemonic Themes in Persian-Iranian Rap] (2019) 8(30) *Jām'e farhang resāne* [Society Culture Media] 122-44.

28 Masoud Kowsari and Mohammad Mahdi Mowlaei, 'Gune-shenāsi-ye goftemānhā-ye musiqi-ye rap-e irāni-fārsi' [A Typology of the Discourses in Iranian-Persian Rap] (2013) 29(8) *Motāle'at farhang va eretebāt* [Cultural Studies and Communication] 91-116.

29 Sholeh Johnston, 'Persian Rap: The Voice of Modern Iran's Youth' (2008) 1(1) *Journal of Persianate Studies* 102-19; Ranjbar (n 24) 50-54; Mahmood Shahabi and Elham Golpush-Nezhad, 'Rap Music and Youth Cultures in Iran: Serious or Light?' (2016) 3 *Youth, Space and Time* 218-19.

30 Golpushnezhad (n 26) 268.

many artists known for poppy, superficial songs became outspoken critics of President Ahmadinejad during the 2009 Green Movement, including Amir Tataloo.<sup>31</sup>

Whereas rap remains essentially unauthorised and unofficial in Iran, several genres, like pop and rock, have now become legalised and accepted following a period of illegality in the wake of the Islamic Revolution. Nooshin argues that whereas in the 1980s the Islamic Republic essentially gave pop music its subversive power by banning it, in the following decade, the government appropriated this genre and embedded it into official establishment institutions in order to render it safe, controllable and docile.<sup>32</sup> She later discussed the recurrence of this trend with the genre of rock music.<sup>33</sup>

Siamdoust points out that the Islamic Republic would rather bring certain music under its control and express a vacuous joy through it, than permit musicians to freely express real, potentially subversive feelings.<sup>34</sup> Only Golpushnezhad has specifically focused on this trend of appropriation in rap. By dividing an analysis of Iranian rap music into three chronological phases, she argues that it has evolved from being completely marginal and unauthorised, to a genre partially supported and funded by the IRGC.<sup>35</sup>

### New nationalist propaganda

There is general agreement in scholarship that Iran's youth is the demographic that the Islamic Republic is most focussed on to preserve its political legitimacy and perpetuate its revolutionary values. Bobbio, Khatam, and Zimmt argue that the Islamic Republic's lack of support from the youth arises from its failure to respond to their demands of economic and social freedoms. Their analysis of the political situation in Iran, however, tends to be overly reductionist; the broad assertions that young people are moving away from Islamic values towards a 'Western' (read 'liberal', 'democratic') lifestyle<sup>36</sup> and that Iran is essentially a 'post-Islamist' society<sup>37</sup> reveal more about the author's political fantasies than those of the young Iranian population. In addition, Bobbio's claim that Western-inspired music is forbidden in Iran betrays a rather superficial understanding of the Iranian cultural sphere: far from being banned, pop and rock music have gradually become endorsed by the Islamic Republic's cultural centres.<sup>38</sup>

Other scholars offer more nuanced and valuable perspectives, such as Varzi<sup>39</sup> with a wide focus on various forms of data (media, newspapers, interviews etc.) and Bajoghli, with detailed findings obtained through two years of participant observation. Propaganda producers in the Revolutionary Guard espouse a view that through their work, they have 'distanced [them]selves from young people and that's the real danger'. Alongside this perceived estrangement exists an acute awareness that the young population would be unlikely to defend the regime in times of crisis, as their fathers and grandfathers had done during the Iran-Iraq War: 'we could turn into Syria!'<sup>40</sup> In addition, their argument that the regime's cultural producers are redirecting propaganda away from a traditional Islamic conception of nationalism towards one that emphasises Iran's uniqueness is highly significant, as it reveals the motives behind the production of new forms of nationalist propaganda in Iran, such as Tataloo's music videos *Energy Hasteei* [Nuclear Energy] and *Shohadā* [Martyrs].

In examinations of this new form of propaganda, however, too much agency has been granted to the media producers of the IRGC, rather than the artists involved. In all accounts of Tataloo's collaboration with conservative branches of government,<sup>41</sup> the rapper is never treated as anything more than a puppet of the regime's propaganda centres. Bajoghli's call for the need in scholarship to perceive regime media producers as 'complex actors' is not extended to the musicians and directors who actually create the nationalist promotional material—the question of who these artists are, and whether they are all fully supportive of the regime, remains wholly unexplored.

In valuing the regime producers' experience over that of the artists they employ, this scholarship has inadvertently reproduced the authoritarian and prescriptive dynamics between official cultural institutions (the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance, the Islamic Propaganda Organisation) and Iranian artists; artists have been stripped of their agency and have failed to be considered beyond the gaze of the state and its intentions. An exploration of Tataloo's unique status would encourage a multifaceted portrayal of the artists involved in regime-supported media, and help paint a fuller, more complex picture of all the actors involved.

### Sources and method

The first two music videos by Tataloo selected for analysis, *Energy Hasteei* [Nuclear Energy] and *Shohadā* [Martyrs], were produced in collaboration with regime media producers and the third, *Jahanam* [Hell], was released independently. Together, they reveal the broad evolution in Tataloo's beliefs, values, and aesthetics from 2015 to 2020.

Since it is impossible for rappers to appear on state media and in concerts, the virtual space of these Internet-propagated mediums is the only concrete link between the rapper and his audience. Whereas most sources discussed above tend to primarily examine the messages found in the lyrical text of these music videos, their visual and musical form is also worthy of investigation. The first two videos do not merely convey the regime media producers' nationalistic messages—they also entertain with aesthetic elements, and form a part of Tataloo's artistic image. Further, the context of

31 Nahid Siamdoust, *Soundtrack of the Revolution: The Politics of Music in Iran* (Stanford University Press 2017) 271–281.

32 Laudan Nooshin, 'Subversion and Countersubversion: Power, Control, and Meaning in the New Iranian Pop Music' in Annie Randall (ed), *Music, Power, and Politics* (Routledge 2005) 250–262.

33 Laudan Nooshin, 'The Language of Rock: Iranian Youth, Popular Music, and National Identity' in Mehdi Semati (ed), *Media, Culture and Society in Iran: Living with Globalization and the Islamic State* (Routledge 2008) 70; Laudan Nooshin, 'Tomorrow Is Ours: Re-Imagining Nation, Performing Youth in the New Iranian Pop Music' in Nooshin (ed) (n 16) 246–249.

34 Golpushnezhad (n 26) 268.

35 *ibid* 262–73.

36 Raz Zimmt, 'The Conservative Predicament in Iran' (*Institute for National Security Studies*, 2017) 2 <<https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/No.-944.pdf>> accessed 12 June 2022.

37 Azam Khatam, *Struggles over Defining the Moral City: The Problem Called 'Youth' in Urban Iran* (Oxford University Press 2010) 14.

38 Emanuele Bobbio, 'Winning Back the "Left Behind": Iran's New Nationalist Agenda' (*Istituto Affari Internazionali* (IAI), 2018) 8 <<https://www.iai.it/en/publicazioni/winning-back-left-behind-irans-new-nationalist-agenda>> accessed 12 June 2022.

39 Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran* (Duke University Press 2006) 13–21.

40 Bajoghli (n 26) 15–22.

41 *ibid* 104–106; Bobbio (n 38) 8; Abbas Milani, 'Iran's 2017 Election: The Opposition Inches Forward' (2017) 28(4) *Journal of Democracy* 30–37; Zimmt (n 36).

their production is highly significant—*Jahanam* [Hell] is all the more significant due to the stark contrast it draws with the relatively conservative aesthetics of *Energy Hasteei* [Nuclear Energy] and *Shohadā* [Martyrs].

## Section 1: Propaganda, entertainment or more? - Amir Tataloo through his music videos

### *Energy Hasteei* [Nuclear Energy]

*hich qodrati nemi tavānad melat-e Irān rā az dāshtan-e energi-ye salah āmiz-e hasteei mahroum sādād* [No power can deprive the Iranian nation of peaceful nuclear energy]. This Persian phrase, appearing at the beginning of *Energy Hasteei*<sup>42</sup> (0:01), is the most straightforward expression of the music video's message. Most striking, however, is the sight of Tataloo, a rapper previously shunned by the Iranian regime, singing and dancing on the deck of the IRIS Damavand, the flagship of the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy's northern fleet.<sup>43</sup> This image quickly captured the attention of international media, who, in conventionally sensationalist terms, noted the significance of such propaganda being released in the final stages of the Iran nuclear talks in Vienna.<sup>44</sup>

It is clear why international journalists exclusively focused on the music video's elements of propaganda—these are the most immediately apparent, and require only a basic knowledge of Iran's nuclear policy to decode.<sup>45</sup> Visually, there is an evident involvement of the regime in the music video's production, in the presence of soldiers, a navy frigate and a not-so-subtle portrait of Khamenei in the background.<sup>46</sup>

The song's lyrics (helpfully translated into English for the benefit of international audiences) condemn the hypocrisy of foreign powers in prohibiting Iran from developing nuclear energy whilst being in possession of nuclear weapons: 'If it's bad, then it's bad for you too!' Tataloo questions why critics have focused on the negative aspects of nuclear energy, when all things contain both 'good' and 'bad': the sky can provide 'rain' but also 'hurricanes, lightning and hailing', a fire can both 'burn' and be 'warm', and water can both 'drown you' and 'save you from thirst'. There is a sudden escalation in analogies however, when the same judgement is applied to guns: they can 'kill' but also 'protect your homeland'.<sup>47</sup> Here, firearms are posited as an extension of nature, hence making it seem perfectly natural for a nation like Iran to develop the capacity for nuclear energy. Released

in the final moments of the JCPOA's negotiation (an agreement on the Iranian nuclear program), this message reads as a nationalistic cry of victory.

Bajoghli discusses a new tactic employed by regime media producers to make their propaganda less easily identifiable—they create small and unidentifiable production studios, still funded by the Revolutionary Guard and the government's cultural budget, but not directly affiliated with them.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, nothing in the music video nor the 'behind-the-scenes' footage published alongside it suggests that this video was funded by these organisations—besides one small detail. In its final frame, acknowledgements of all the military divisions who assisted with the music video's production are followed by a reference to '*shabake-ye interneti-ye nasr*' [Nasr Internet Network].<sup>49</sup> The '*darbāre-ye mā*' [About Us] section of this production studio's website reveals that it was founded in order to combat the domination of the '*mafīyā-ye resāne-ye sionisti*' [Zionist media mafia],<sup>50</sup> betraying some of the Revolutionary Guard's harsh anti-Israeli zeal.<sup>51</sup>

There are several elements of *Energy Hasteei*, however, that journalists and scholars alike have omitted in their focus on its nationalistic propaganda—who the video is addressing and how the video addresses this audience. The populist message in Tataloo's lyrics, portraying him as a simple, everyday Iranian who is unaware of 'what is happening in [his] country' but who senses 'a scent of exhaustion'<sup>52</sup> is not only meant for an audience in Iran. The fact that this was Tataloo's first music video to come with English subtitles is not a mere coincidence: the video was clearly intended to have a global reach. At regular intervals, images of 'normal' Iranian citizens holding posters with English slogans appear, urging viewers not to 'let the media fool [them]', and declaring that Iran is a 'peaceful' (sic) nation who has 'never invaded a country'.<sup>53</sup> Behind these citizens are some of the most popular Tehrani sites that any tourist would recognise: the Azadi and Milad towers (0:42, 1:48), the Darabad quarter leading up to the Alborz mountains (0:34) and the capital's train station (0:16).<sup>54</sup> Tataloo's assertion that 'silence is for statues'<sup>55</sup> also gives the impression that he is a courageous hero speaking out against injustice, a narrative that is easily digestible for foreign viewers who only have a superficial knowledge of Iranian politics.

Beyond this political narrative, however, there is also something else at play. Conventional aesthetic elements of hip-hop music videos are appropriated and sanitised in *Energy Hasteei*, in order to instinctively appeal to Iran's young population, without crossing any of the government's cultural red lines. The standard rap trope of backup dancers, usually a troupe of attractive women or members of the rapper's clique, is here replaced by stone-faced soldiers in uniform performing a drill with their rifles in hand. These servicemen can even be seen singing along to the song's chorus.<sup>56</sup> Considering dance's position as the most vilified art form in Iran,<sup>57</sup> the use of a

42 '*Energy Hasteei*' [Nuclear Energy], (Youtube, Amir Tataloo, 12 July 2015) 0:01 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VywTiTVMHts>> accessed 12 June 2022.

43 *ibid* 1:07-1:14

44 Hanif Kashani, 'Iranian Rapper Drops Bomb with Pro-Nuke Video' (*Al-Monitor*, 14 July 2015) <<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2015/07/FOR%20WED%20iran-rapper-tataloo-video.html>> accessed 12 June 2022.

45 Kay Armin Serjoie, 'This Is the Surprising Way the Iranian Military Responded to the Nuclear Deal' *Time* (New York, 16 July 2015) <<https://time.com/3958928/amir-tataloo-iranian-military/>> accessed 12 June 2022; Ishaan Tharoor, 'Watch: Iranian Rapper Celebrates Nuclear Power from the Deck of a Warship' *The Washington Post* (Washington, 16 July 2015) <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/07/16/watch-iranian-rapper-celebrates-nuclear-power-from-the-deck-of-a-warship/>> accessed 12 June 2022.

46 Tataloo (n 42) 1:03, 1:06, 1:21.

47 *ibid* 0:04, 0:31-33, 0:42, 0:46, 0:59.

48 Bajoghli (n 26) 114.

49 Tataloo (n 42) 3:15.

50 NasrTV, (*NasrTV*, 2021, [fa.nasrtv.com/page/about](http://fa.nasrtv.com/page/about)).

51 Al-Monitor Staff, 'IRGC Chief: Israel Could Be Blown up in a Single Operation' (*Al-Monitor*, 6 May 2021) <<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/05/irgc-chief-israel-could-be-blown-single-operation>> accessed 12 June 2022.

52 Tataloo (n 42) 1:38-41.

53 *ibid* 0:16, 0:36, 1:49.

54 *ibid* 0:42, 1:48, 0:34, 0:16.

55 *ibid* 2:44.

56 *ibid* 1:04, 1:19.

57 Parmis Mozafari, *Negotiating a Position: Women Musicians and Dancers in*

military drill as a substitute for backup dancing allows the video's producers to preserve the form of a hip-hop trope whilst avoiding any problematic display of immodesty. Similarly, the fog machine typically employed in music videos for atmospheric effect is here replaced by smoke grenades and the navy ship's funnels.<sup>58</sup>

A parallel process of the militarisation and sanitisation of hip-hop tropes is also audible in the music of *Energy Hasteei*. Several conventional elements of rap music are present, such as a groovy, hip-hop style break being played on the drums, as well as floaty arpeggiated melodies from a keyboard in the verses. In the chorus, however, a noticeable shift takes place.<sup>59</sup> Monotone, choir-like backing vocals, short staccato notes on the strings, and intermittent shouts all imbue the music with an element of tension, more typical of military parades or anthems than rap songs.

### *Shohadā* [Martyrs]

The music video for Amir Tataloo's song *Shohadā* [Martyrs] was released on September 23 2015, during Sacred Defence Week, Iran's most important annual commemoration of the Iran-Iraq war, for which the government schedules public events, television and radio shows.

The narrative of martyrdom has its origins in the Battle of Karbala (680 AD) during which the grandson of the prophet Muhammad, Hussain ibn Ali, was killed and beheaded. In fact, virtually all Shi'i imams excluding the 12th are conventionally believed to have been killed in their youth by their opponents. Consequently, *shahādāt* [martyrdom] is intrinsically linked to the ideal of heroism in Shi'ism. In Hamid Dabashi's words: 'the only hero is a dead hero'.<sup>60</sup>

When Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980, Ayatollah Khomeini was provided an ideal opportunity to strengthen his authority as a religious leader. The largest mobilisation of the Iranian population was essentially achieved by embracing martyrdom as 'state policy'.<sup>61</sup> The phrases *jang-e tahmili* [imposed war] and *def'ā'e muqaddas* [sacred defence] became common in public discourse, due to their implication that fighting on the front, more than a protection of the nation, constituted a heroic religious act.<sup>62</sup>

Released only two months after *Energy Hasteei*, the music video for *Shohadā* similarly represents the desire of regime media producers to move away from traditional Islamic conceptions of nationalism towards those that will resonate with Iran's youth. Much like the Museum of Sacred Defence, opened in 2012 in Tehran, *Shohadā* redirects the narrative of martyrdom: instead of being seen as a heroic deed or a path to heaven, dying for one's country is portrayed as being brutal, but necessary.

*Shohadā* opens with a dedication in Persian: '*be khānevādehā-ye shohadā-ye jang-e tahmili va hasteei*' [to the families of the martyrs of the imposed and nuclear war].<sup>63</sup> The video is essentially comprised

of three perspectives: soldiers dying at the front, the assassinations of nuclear scientists, and Amir Tataloo paying tribute by singing and rapping. Throughout the music video, the casualties of the 'imposed' Iran-Iraq war are visually equated with the assassinations of nuclear scientists, which the state claims were orchestrated by Israeli spies.<sup>64</sup> This parallelism allows regime producers to renew the narrative of martyrdom for a new generation by presenting scenes that young people will be familiar with, since the assassinations portrayed are seemingly based on real events: the first<sup>65</sup>, on Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan's killing by car bomb<sup>66</sup> and the second,<sup>67</sup> on the drive-by shooting of Darioush Rezaeinejad in 2011.<sup>68</sup>

The core message here, that all those who die for the state are martyrs, is expressed in several ways which aim to appeal to young people. Firstly, the emotional impact of the assassinations is increased by portraying the victims as '*sāde va 'āsheq*' [simple and in love]: the first is shown buying a teddy bear, presumably for his love interest, moments before his death, and the second is shown laughing with his wife on the doorstep of their home.<sup>69</sup> Secondly, the image of such a popular celebrity as Tataloo standing in front of coffins draped with the Iranian flag presents a role model for young people to follow in the expression of their nationalistic grief. Furthermore, Tataloo's singing and rapping conveys grief through a medium that the youth will be able to relate to: '*bazi harf-hā geriye dārand*' [some words cry]. Finally, his assertion that anybody can give their life for their country, '*farq nadāre ke jensi, ke rangi, ke qomi*' [no matter what gender, colour or ethnicity], reads as a rather unusual attempt to appeal to the more liberal tendencies of Iran's youth.<sup>70</sup>

Amir Tataloo, though taking centre stage in *Energy Hasteei* and *Shohadā*, has failed to have been considered as a complex character. Any investigation of his motivations, actions and goals in the context of the music videos has been omitted in favour of what he represents: a shocking symbol of the regime's desperation to appeal to young people, or of rap's appropriation for the purposes of propaganda. It is no less important to ask what *Energy Hasteei* and *Shohadā* mean for Tataloo, lest he be treated as a mere pawn of the regime's media producers. Though the rapper claims 'No, I am not involved in political games',<sup>71</sup> for over a decade he has either been directly associated with politicians, sung about political issues, or taken a public stance on contemporary political issues. In 2009, Tataloo sang in support of the reformist politician Mir Hossein Mousavi during the Iranian parliamentary elections, with the song *Irān-e Sabz* [Green Iran]. Keeping in mind also that Tataloo was arrested in 2013 for appearing on unauthorised satellite channels, such high-profile, state-supported productions as *Energy Hasteei* and

<[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HK\\_A-tgM5C0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HK_A-tgM5C0)> accessed 12 June 2022.

64 Ian Black, 'Bullet-Riddled Cars and Lush Gardens: Iran's Memorial to Its 'Nuclear Martyrs'' *The Guardian* (London, 2 July 2015) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/02/iran-memorial-museum-nuclear-martyrs>> accessed 12 June 2022.

65 Tataloo (n 63) 2:04-20.

66 Saeed Kamali Dehghan, 'Iran Nuclear Scientist Killed in Tehran Motorbike Bomb Attack' *The Guardian* (London, 11 January 2012) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/11/iran-nuclear-scientist-killed>> accessed 12 June 2022.

67 Tataloo (n 63) 2:40-55.

68 Saeed Kamali Dehghan, 'Iran Denies Assassinated Academic Worked on Nuclear Projects' *The Guardian* (London, 25 July 2011) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/25/iran-denies-assassinated-academic-nuclear-connection>> accessed 12 June 2022.

69 Tataloo (n 63) 2:02, 2:04, 2:43.

70 *ibid* 2:45, 2:30.

71 Tataloo (n 42) 2:02, 1:32.

*Post-Revolution Iran* (The University of Leeds 2011) 240.

58 Tataloo (n 42) 2:02, 1:38.

59 *ibid* 1:04-28.

60 Hamid Dabashi, *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest* (Harvard University Press 2011) 82-4.

61 Roxanne Varzi, 'Iran's Pieta: Motherhood, Sacrifice and Film in the Aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War' (2008) 88 *Feminist Review* 47.

62 Pedram Partovi, 'Martyrdom and the "Good Life" in the Iranian Cinema of Sacred Defense' (2008) 28(3) *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 522.

63 '*Shohadā*' [Martyrs], (*Youtube*, Amir Tataloo, 23 September 2015) 0:01

*Shohadā* could be seen as providing the rapper with an opportunity to reinvent himself, and wipe his slate clean in the eyes of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Certainly, his attire in the music videos suggests as much: the understated tones of his clothing, his beard and the Islamic prayer beads around his neck would seem far more tolerable to government officials than his trademark long hair, exposed chest, arm tattoos and cross necklace.

### **Jahanam [Hell]**

Tataloo's music video for *Jahanam*, released independently in 2020, is far more ambitious than *Energy Hasteei* and *Shohadā*, both conceptually and in terms of production value. In duration alone, *Jahanam* has a longer runtime than both of the state-funded projects combined. Where *Energy Hasteei* and *Shohadā* were both literal and realistic in their narratives, *Jahanam* stands as a multi-layered symbolic exploration of hell through themes of depression, betrayal and political injustice.

Three scenarios are juxtaposed in *Jahanam*, all of which end in Tataloo's death. The first shows the rapper walking to the edge of a rooftop, looking down at a city, only to turn around and be pushed off by his double.<sup>72</sup> This marks the culmination of his character's increasingly deteriorating mental state, reflected in the song's lyrics: '*az hamishe ghamgin taram*' [more depressed than ever], '*chizi namunde azam*' [there's nothing left of me] and '*jahanam mirize tu tanam*' [hell is pouring into me].<sup>73</sup> Here, hell is used as a symbolic representation of a dark mental state, from which there is no escape. In the second narrative, Amir Tataloo depicts a passionate love affair which ends in heartbreak. This hell - the pain of his lover's betrayal—is expressed visually through Tataloo's second death: moments after being resuscitated by a doctor, his partner plants a kiss on his lips and proceeds to stab him in the heart.<sup>74</sup>

The third narrative portrayed in *Jahanam* is arguably the most intricate: Tataloo's tale of incarceration and torture functions on both a symbolic and a literal level. *Jahanam* opens with a scene of Tataloo on trial—he is seen standing in the defendant's podium in a prison uniform and handcuffs. Following this trial, Tataloo is violently thrown into a prison cell<sup>75</sup>. It quickly becomes clear, however, that this tale of imprisonment is more than just a metaphor for his vilification and ostracization by society. The song's lyrics suddenly become very literal: '*bāyad jelo bāzpor chet furan barge ru pureh kossher konam*' [I have to fill the paper with a bunch of bullshit in front of the interrogator] and '*mige bas ni bāzam benevis be ki vasli martike olāq?*' [he orders me to write more and asks me: who are you working for, you prick?].<sup>76</sup> The tendency of the Iranian criminal justice system to crack down on artists for ludicrous charges is well documented<sup>77</sup>, and here Tataloo reveals another face of hell, a country where his fate is either '*a'dām ya qafs*' [execution or a cage]<sup>78</sup> (*Jahanam*' 5:12). The injustice of this system is not only expressed

72 '*Jahanam*' [Hell], (YouTube, Amir Tataloo, 15 Jan. 2020) 0:49, 3:22, 6:14 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1OELRZ0eOo>> accessed 12 June 2022.

73 *ibid* 1:19, 6:11, 6:17.

74 *ibid* 5:42, 5:49, 5:57.

75 *ibid* 0:17, 1:10.

76 *ibid* 4:30, 4:45.

77 'Tortured Filmmakers and Musicians Face Imminent Arrest Amid Crackdown on Artists', (Amnesty International, 1 March 2016) <<https://www.amnestyusa.org/press-releases/iran-tortured-filmmaker-and-musicians-face-imminent-arrest-amid-crackdown-on-artists>> accessed 12 June 2022.

78 Tataloo (n 72) 5:12.

through the very direct portrayal of abuse in an interrogation cell, but the image of a prison guard psychotically attempting to stab a bird with a screwdriver through the bars of its cage.<sup>79</sup>

Whether or not one enjoys Tataloo's character or music, it is undeniable that *Jahanam* uncovers an artistry which transcends the rapper's one-dimensional portrayal in scholarship and media as a mere party rapper or a puppet of the Revolutionary Guard's media centres. In addition, it is hard to think of a greater change of lifestyle than Tataloo's in between *Energy Hasteei* and *Jahanam*. Whereas the rapper appears as a model Islamic citizen in the former, his self-portrayal in *Jahanam* deliberately crosses the regime's cultural red lines, as if he is keen on provoking officials at every turn. The music video shows Tataloo drinking whisky, cracking a whip whilst staring at a woman's derriere and smoking cannabis.<sup>80</sup> Tataloo's lyrics, too, in addition to being sexually explicit, also contain numerous examples of profanity. With *Jahanam*, Tataloo consciously crosses the point of no return in attempting to appeal to the Iranian authorities - the values espoused in *Jahanam* are the polar opposite of regime-friendly.

*Energy Hasteei* and *Shohadā* stood out upon their release in 2015 due to their impressive visuals, and seemed to suggest that regime-funded music videos were far superior in production value to those independently released by rappers. The video for Tataloo's *Jahanam*, however, reveals that such a large contrast no longer exists in 2020: unofficial rappers are now able to release productions which rival the quality of state-supported projects.

A small sign in one frame of *Jahanam* reveals that the music video was filmed in Turkey: '*hasta hizmetleri*' [patient services],<sup>81</sup> where Tataloo currently lives. The new trend of Iranian rappers releasing immensely popular tracks and music videos from abroad—*Jahanam* has 3.5 million views, and the LA-produced *Tehran Tokyo* by Tataloo's friend Sasy has 5 million—is reminiscent of Iranian expatriate music releases in the 80s and 90s. So-called *Tehrangelesi* [a portmanteau of Tehran and Los Angeles] musicians were able to reach Iranian audiences on the black market through cassettes—a new technology far harder for authorities to confiscate and which listeners could copy with ease.<sup>82</sup> It would seem that for this recent wave of rappers, who have also left Iran and are taking advantage of the possibilities of a novel medium, social media is the new cassette.

## **Section 2: The legitimisation of rap in Iran**

Whether rap music is to become fully sanctioned in Iran remains in question. However, it is clear that a process of co-option and sanitisation has begun in relation to rappers, their music, and aesthetics. If this trend were to continue, rap would join both pop and rock as genres which were once entirely subversive, but gradually became adopted into official state framework in order to rid them of any disruptive potential. The figure of Amir Tataloo, as the most noteworthy and infamous rap musician involved

in politics, provides a valuable angle from which it is possible to consider on what arenas the legalisation of rap music could play out, and who could contribute to its unfolding.

79 *ibid* 5:01, 5:35.

80 *ibid* 1:43, 1:44, 5:51.

81 *ibid* 3:39.

82 GJ Breyley and Sasan Fatemi, *Iranian Music and Popular Entertainment from Motrebi to Losangelesi and beyond* (Routledge 2016) 141.

As explored in the first chapter, music videos funded by the Revolutionary Guard's media centres such as *Energy Hasteei* and *Shohadā* mark the beginning of a co-optation of rappers and the aesthetics of their music for the purpose of making nationalist propaganda more appealing to young people. As such, they constitute an important arena through which rappers could gain a higher profile, and their music could gradually become more acceptable. If, like the Chinese government,<sup>83</sup> the propaganda centres of the Islamic Republic such as the IRGC or the Islamic Propaganda Organisation continue to fund and produce music videos to further their message, this would undoubtedly improve rap's reputation amongst even the most hardline branches of the state—as it would demonstrate that even the vilified rap music can be used to promote the values of the Islamic Republic.

Social media provides a space both for famous rappers to gain official social recognition, and for the transmission of hardline political views. Tataloo has published several posts in support of the Ayatollah and the Revolutionary Guard, and has sought to legitimise himself through social media in other ways, such as appearing alongside celebrities that are accepted in the official sphere. As an example, the rapper attended a Persepolis F.C. training session in April 2020 and was photographed alongside famous footballers such as Payam Sadeghian and Mohsen Bengar.<sup>84</sup> Such photoshoots are beneficial for both parties involved: footballers are able to gain publicity through Tataloo's countless social media followers, and the rapper, by association with figures that are legally recognised by the government's cultural system, acquires an air of legitimacy and greater cultural influence.

The presence of unlicensed yet popular musicians at official events and conferences is an additional site for the negotiation of rap's legitimacy: much like with footballers, appearing alongside eminent politicians allows rappers to seem endorsed by the regime, whereas politicians can extend their sphere of influence to the musicians' young fanbase. The principalist politician Hamid Rasaei, prior to denouncing Tataloo for his 'heretic' views on Instagram, was seen shaking the rapper's hand and gifting him a 'prize' caricature at a Fars News ceremony in July 2017.<sup>85</sup> Fars News is the 'semi-official' news agency of the Iranian government, associated with the Revolutionary Guard<sup>86</sup>—suggesting that Tataloo's relationship with the latter extended beyond the production of music videos or the publishing of conservative opinions on his social media.

Undoubtedly the most significant of these encounters between rappers and hardline politicians remains Tataloo's meeting with Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi in May 2017. This 'Elvis Meets

Nixon' moment came as a shock to many Iranians, not least for the sheer absurdity of seeing the two figures sitting side by side: the rapper's tattoos, visible on his bare forearms, strongly juxtapose with Raisi's sombre black cleric robes.<sup>87</sup> Beyond their appearance, Tataloo's career path and past arrests for 'encouraging prostitution and corruption' appear wholly irreconcilable with Raisi's exceptionally conservative politics: the latter was named as one of the four figures who led the 1988 executions of Iranian political prisoners, in which over 5,000 political dissidents were imprisoned, interrogated and killed because of their opinions or non-violent campaigning<sup>88</sup> ('Blood-Soaked Secrets: Why Iran's 1988 Prison Massacres Are Ongoing Crimes Against Humanity'). In a video of the meeting, Raisi is noticeably uncomfortable as they discuss Imam Reza, the eighth Imam in Twelver Shi'ism, and his national significance: Tataloo asserts that Imam Reza is not just for clerics but 'barā-ye hame-ye Irān-e' [but for all Iranians!].<sup>89</sup> Indeed, Raisi is also the custodian for the Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad, and the son-in-law of Ahmad Alamolhoda, the prayer leader and Grand Imam of the shrine who, incidentally, banned all music performances in the city of Mashhad.<sup>90</sup>

Raisi was in the midst of his presidential bid when the video of his meeting with Tataloo was released in May 2017, and many joked that the rapper cost him the election, as Rouhani was re-elected.<sup>91</sup> The implications of this encounter, however, between hardline cleric and unauthorised musician, are quite serious. The fact that such a conservative politician would even consider meeting a rapper, let alone release a video of their encounter, is a testament to the hardliners' sheer desperation to appeal to young people. It also suggests that similar compromises in the future could pave the way to the legitimisation of unauthorised musicians.

Despite the fact that Tataloo emigrated to Turkey, and spoke out against the regime and Islam in Instagram posts and his music video *Jahanam*, his popularity on social media continues to be exploited to spread conservative political messages. In December 2020, a video recorded from Instagram Live was posted on Youtube by the channel 'Amir Tataloo Original Fan'. In the video, an older woman discusses sexual topics with a teenager in order to encourage him to delete Instagram.<sup>92</sup> Iran's Communications and Information Technology Minister, Mohammad Javad Azari-Jahromi, stated that a 'certain hardline thinktank' was responsible for the widespread distribution of the video, which reached half a million views on Youtube.<sup>93</sup>

87 *Jalase-ye Amir Tataloo bā Ebrahim-e Ra'isi* [Amir Tataloo's Meeting with Ebrahim Raisi], (*Aparat*, amiromega, June 2020).

88 'Blood-Soaked Secrets: Why Iran's 1988 Prison Massacres Are Ongoing Crimes Against Humanity', (*Amnesty International*, 2018) <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/9421/2018/en>> accessed 12 June 2022.

89 (n 87) 0:50-5.

90 Rohollah Faghihi, 'Senior Iran Cleric Faces down Culture Minister over Concerts' (*Al-Monitor*, 23 August 2016) <<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/08/iran-mashhad-concerts-friday-prayer-leader-alamolhoda.html>> accessed 12 June 2022.

91 Holly Dagres, 'This Young Iranian Rapper May Have Cost Raisi the Presidency' (*Al-Monitor*, 31 May 2017) <<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/05/iran-raisi-tataloo-tatalee-election-race-endorsement-rapper.html>> accessed 12 June 2022.

92 'Amir Tataloo Original Fan', (*YouTube*, Amir Tataloo Original Fan, 17 December 2020) <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMqe-B\\_1Ohc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMqe-B_1Ohc)> accessed 12 June 2022.

93 'Iran Judiciary Prosecutes Communications Minister Over Internet Access', (*Iran International*, 20 January 2021) <<https://old.iranintl.com/en/iran-politics/iran-judiciary-prosecutes-communications-minister-over-internet-access>> accessed 12 June 2022.

83 'Chinese Health Workers Dance and Sing in Music Video to Promote Covid Vaccine', (*The Independent* (London, May 2021) <<https://www.independent.co.uk/tv/news/chinese-health-officials-dance-and-sing-in-music-video-to-promote-covid-vaccine-v68bb264d>> accessed 12 June 2022.

84 (*Varzesh3*, 21 April 2020) <[tinyurl.com/tataloofootball](http://tinyurl.com/tataloofootball)> accessed 12 June 2022.

85 Hossein Velayati, 'Hamid Rasaei and Amir Tataloo' (Wikimedia Commons, Fars News, 16 July 2017) <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hamid\\_Rasaei\\_and\\_Amir\\_Tataloo\\_13960425001800636358248576455809\\_36810.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hamid_Rasaei_and_Amir_Tataloo_13960425001800636358248576455809_36810.jpg)> accessed 12 June 2022.

86 Maryam Sinaiee, 'Iranian News Agency Targeted by US Sanction Resorts to Hacking to Get Domain Back' (*Radio Farda*, 25 January 2020) <<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iranian-news-agency-targeted-by-us-sanction-resorts-to-hacking-to-get-domain-back-/30396680.html>> accessed 12 June 2022.

What is unusual about this video, however, is the appearance of the woman, Mina Namdari. She appears without a hijab (compulsory in Iran) and with visible cleavage and a bottle of wine in her hands (though she fails to actually drink from it during the video). It is difficult to understand why a hardline think tank would promote such a video that is blatantly in transgression of Iran's modesty laws, unless one considers the Revolutionary Guard's tendency in recent years to attempt to conceal their role in the production of certain propaganda videos.<sup>94</sup> IRGC producers often include profanity and anti-regime messages in their media in order to mask the fact that it is propaganda. With this video, it seems as if hardline producers are hiding their involvement by employing a woman who superficially appears to be breaking the Islamic Republic's modesty laws.

There exist several stakeholders which negotiate the legality and legitimacy of rap music through the arenas outlined above. Media producers in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps such as Reza Hosseini believe that they need to 'tell better stories'<sup>95</sup> to young people through their content, so that they do not feel ostracised by nationalistic or revolutionary values; they recognise a need to speak 'in the language of youth'. By pushing their sanitised and professionally-produced appropriation of rap into the limelight, they are also able to detract attention from its more subversive form, essentially silencing any voices of dissent. Their enduring interest in rap as a means to talk to young people, even after Amir Tataloo has turned against them, is clearly visible in the propaganda video published through a Tataloo fan page on Youtube.

Hardline politicians too, such as Hamid Rasaei and Ebrahim Raisi, by appearing alongside Tataloo, essentially recognise rap music's legitimacy and influence in Iranian society and bring it into an official framework. Politicians meeting such rappers displays this genre of music in the light of public attention, and suggests that their transgressive history can be overlooked on certain occasions – casting doubt on the legitimacy of rap's illegality.

Of course, the central factor in any question of rap's possible legalisation in Iran remains the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, from which all musicians must obtain a license in order to perform and release any music legally. The ministry's opposition to rap as a genre seemingly arises out of an aversion to its implications of Western influence, rather than out of any particular opposition to its musical aesthetics. It appears that it mostly fears the word 'rap', and its 'European and American' allusions, but recognises that there is potential for a legitimate form of the genre to be fully licensed in the future: the director of the ministry's music department Pirooz Arjmand suggests that the term '*goft-avāz*' [musical spoken word] be used to replace 'rap', which he asserts takes notice of a tradition of musical spoken word that existed far before rap arrived in Iran, called '*tartil khāni*' [recitation].<sup>96</sup>

Indeed, the arrest in March 2021 of producers associated with Sasy Mankan's video *Tehran Tokyo*, in which he appears alongside American porn star Alexis Texas, reveals that combating the influence of these expatriate rappers still remains a matter of great concern to the Islamic Republic and its cultural centres. Several members of the Iranian parliament decried the video's harmful influence, perceiving it as an issue of '*āsibha-ye rohāni [...] barāye*

*kudakān-e bi dafā'e*' [psychological harm to helpless children]<sup>97</sup> or '*kudakān rā be tamāsha-ye pornogrāfi tashviq konad*' [encouraging children to watch pornography].<sup>98</sup>

The example of pop music's legalisation, which partially arose from the government's failure to quash the inflow of subversive expatriate pop in the 80s and 90s, suggests that the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance would benefit from giving licenses to more rappers. Since they are unable to prevent the songs of expatriate rappers such as Amir Tataloo and Sasy Mankan from spreading through the internet, sanctioning a legitimate domestic rap scene would provide a viable alternative to the 'obscene content' these musicians freely release from abroad.<sup>99</sup>

The IRGC as well as hardline politicians such as Hamid Rasaei and Ebrahim Raisi, perhaps inadvertently, provided Tataloo with a certain legitimacy and cultural standing by granting him an official stage. To a certain extent, propaganda posted through Tataloo's fan pages reveals that the IRGC hardliners still recognise rap's powerful influence. There is also the sense, however, that the compromise between hardline branches of the state and rappers such as Tataloo is no longer deemed beneficial to either party. Why would Raisi deem it necessary to resort to endorsing such controversial figures when presidential elections were rigged in his favour?<sup>100</sup>

Furthermore, as *Jahanam* has shown, rappers no longer need to depend on the Revolutionary Guard's media centres or the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in order to release professional music and video productions. The power of social media such as Instagram and Youtube has allowed certain rappers to create a 'hyperground' rap scene, which the Iranian government cannot censor and through which they can escape its restrictions. Though it is still uncertain whether rap music is to become fully legitimate in the next few years, the case of Tataloo suggests that rappers like himself hold immense influence over the future of the genre, and continues to stand as a strong symbol of rap's persistence influence and significance in Iranian society.

## Conclusion

If we are to know about Amir Tataloo, it is clear that a different approach is needed.

Until researchers move beyond the overly simplistic narratives by which they define rappers, as either fighting against the regime or collaborating with it, they will fail to gain any real sense of rap music's significance in Iran. In this article, I have attempted to provide several alternate perspectives which account for the multifaceted intersections between music and Iranian politics and paint a more complex picture of the status of rappers in Iranian society.

Firstly, I have discussed how certain aesthetic aspects of Amir Tataloo's music videos, which are taken for granted in favour of

94 Bajoghli (n 26) 114.

95 *ibid* 2, 100.

96 '*Āyā vezārat-e ershād musiqi-ye rap rā be rasmiyat mi shenāsād?*' [Does the Ministry of Culture officially recognise rap music?] (*Tarāne Music*, 13 May 2016).

97 Mojtaba Tavangar, (*Twitter*, 2 March 2021) <<https://twitter.com/motavangar/status/1366636303828340739>> accessed 12 June 2022.

98 Mohammad Sarshar, (*Twitter*, 2 March 2021) <[https://twitter.com/m\\_sarshar/status/1366637692038107137](https://twitter.com/m_sarshar/status/1366637692038107137)> accessed 12 June 2022.

99 'Iranians Arrested Over Viral Video Featuring US Porn Star', (*IranWire*, 10 March 2021) <<https://iranwire.com/en/features/69145>> accessed 12 June 2022.

100 Ali Vaez, 'Iran's Rigged Election' (*Foreign Affairs*, 16 June 2021) <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2021-06-16/irans-rigged-election>> accessed 12 June 2022.

their immediate political messages, reveal deeper trends affecting rap music in Iran behind the scenes. In *Energy Hasteei* [Nuclear Energy] and *Shohadā* [Martyrs], certain tropes of hip-hop culture are co-opted and rendered 'safe': a troupe of backup dancers is replaced by a military parade, and smoke grenades become fog machines. Tataloo's *Jahanam* [Hell] reveals that rappers no longer have to depend on funding from the Revolutionary Guard's media centres in order to create visually impressive music videos. In addition, by juxtaposing the discourse between the videos funded by the IRGC and one which Tataloo released independently, I call for a more multifarious and subtle portrayal of the rapper: one which considers what these videos could represent from his perspective.

Secondly, I have examined Amir Tataloo's career and interactions with various branches of government in order to explore the negotiation of rap music's legality in Iran. I have revealed how the IRGC and other conservative branches of government continue to recognise rap music's influence, and the extent to which social media rappers from abroad constitute a threat to the strict guidelines of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. It is worth considering whether such factors could lead to the emergence of an official form of rap music, vacuous and emptied of any potentially subversive meaning, as has occurred previously with the genres of pop and rock.