

~~Censorship~~ to Retain Power: Covering/Erasing, Dismembering, and Cutting Off

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We are part of a global society that is completely accustomed to, surrounded by, and entangled in a filtered reality defined by those who want to retain power. It is often believed that society has come a long way, that we are now living in a world of so-called freedom, of sexual liberation, and autonomy. However, censorship and its effects, though more subtle than in the past, are still corrosively pervasive, especially in countries such as Iran. For the purposes of this essay, censorship will be defined as the arbitrary suppression, obstruction, or erasure of communication, speech, or other information considered threatening, sensitive, objectionable, or inappropriate according to a government. Regardless of its legality, censorship is an effort to bolster a government's power by suppressing expression and preventing the spread of criticism.² Suppression of information and communication is present in every country to an extent; however, few governments regulate its people as much as the Iranian government does for the sake of maintaining and exerting power. We live in a time when Islamophobia and right-wing extremism are on the rise. Politicians are weaponizing Iranian struggles and framing them as an issue of Islam and women's rights, to push their own political rhetoric and justifications of Islamophobia. It is important to establish that in this essay, Islam will not be discussed as a critique of Islam itself but rather a critique of people in power using it as a means to control and silence the people of Iran. In this essay, we will consider several methods of censorship used by the Iranian government including completely erasing or covering up a person, censoring that targets specific areas of the body, and shutting down the internet. Censorship will be discussed as a violent means to erase a person, to dismember the self, to cut off Iranians from one another, and ultimately to deny the Iranian people any power.

"In Iran there is freedom of expression. It is freedom after expression that does not exist"

- Hadi Khorsandi¹

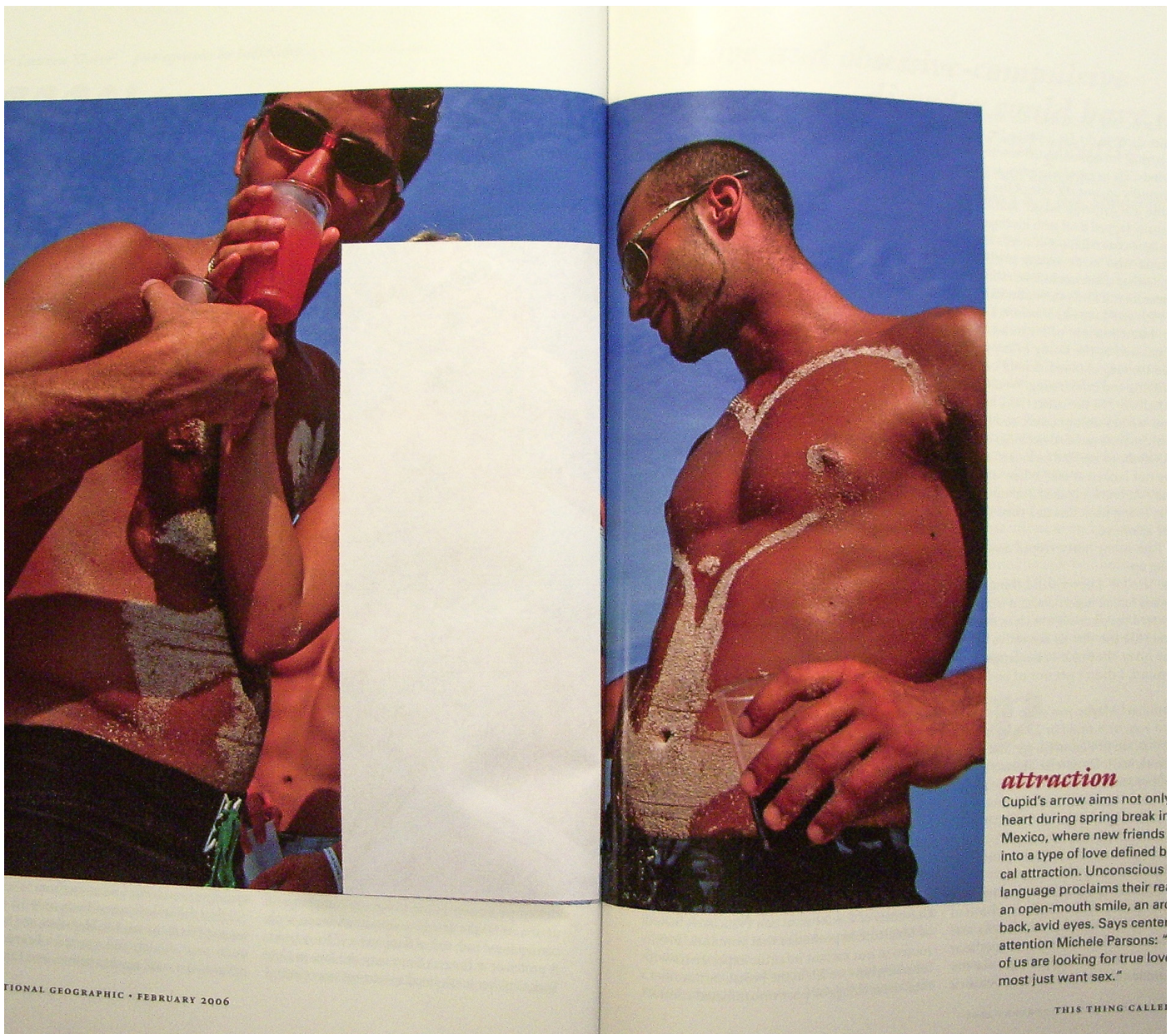


Figure1. Jonathan Lundqvist, *Another Spread in the Feature Article About Love*, 2006.

ang, dat zijn pijlen ook vaak richt p allochtonen, voelt zich niet verantwoordelijk.

Verhofstadt. Die zei kort na de moorden: „Ik denk dat het een daad is die iedereen in ons land tot

view waarin Filip Dewinter vorig jaar zei dat zijn partij islamofob is en dat de joden de eerste slach-

wer: „Bij de mensen die de partijbijeenkomsten bezoeken vind je zeker nog onverholten racisme.”

we niet. Het zou iets nieuws zijn als de partij hierdoor kiezers verliest”, aldus de politicooloog.



en beveiligingsmedewerker van de top van Europese en Latijns-Amerikaanse landen, dit weekeinde in Wenen, haast zich naar een Argentijnse demonstrante die tijdens het nemen van de groepsfoto betoogt tegen de bouw van twee papierfabrieken aan de grensrivier met Uruguay. (Foto AFP)

Chávez splitzwam op top met E11

Figure 2. Jan Dirk Van Der Burg, *Censorship Daily*, 2012.

ARTICLES

Part 1: To Veil, To Cover, and To Erase

In Iran, the Farsi word “chador” directly translates as “tent”; it is the traditional veil worn in the country. The loose, typically black, piece of fabric leaves the front open for the wearer to close it with her own hands from within. Iranian women have a long and increasingly disputatious relationship to both the practice of veiling and the country that imposes these dress codes onto them. Debates regarding the presence of women in public by maundering government officials are ensnared, entangled within the absolute pandemonium of contentious ideologies and disparate understandings of the scarf, all with little regard for women’s voices. What is achieved by controlling how women dress for the theocratic regime that enforces them and what do these patriarchal dress codes mean for the women who are forced to comply?

For some women, the chador functions as a place of comfort and protection to practice their faith. Wearing the veil can also be a way of challenging imperialism and colonialism imposed by the West onto Iran. In 1936, the Unveiling Act, which banned all Islamic veils and male traditional clothing, was implemented by pro-Western ruler Reza Shah Pahlavi as a way to “modernize” the country and “liberate” women.³ Many women chose to stay home to avoid harassment and forceful unveiling, “contradicting the ‘emancipation’ rhetoric of Reza Shah’s regime.”⁴ During the Pahlavi era (1925–79), publicly veiling was a dangerous and brave act of defiance that expressed discontent with the Shah, a way for women to reclaim control over her body and choice. In 1983, the Veiling Act was introduced by

revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini, who also claimed to “free” women, in this case from what he considered to be overly sexualized Western ideals. Revolutionary leaders mobilized women and veiled the issue of women’s rights by focusing on their rhetoric, claiming that women fighting in the revolution were doing so for their “independence” and “liberty.”⁵ Under these circumstances, the “tent” became a prison for many women or an erasure of their autonomy. It is the most visible part of a deeper issue rooted in the strict censorship and controlling of Iranians, specifically women’s bodies, and their lack of choice in a society entrenched in patriarchy. In the West, debates regarding veiling distract from discussions around other issues that affect women, such as economic policies that reinforce gender inequality. The compulsory veil is less a question about Islam than it is a question about choice and authority over one’s self-expression. We might consider the veil as a way to “sur/veil,” as Megan MacDonald points out, meaning to gaze as a way of controlling and “sur/veil” meaning “on the veil.”⁶ Women in Iran live under surveillance by the “morality” police who patrol cities to ensure women are observing the mandatory veiling.⁷ The veil, when used to sur/veil, cover up, and erase, becomes an instrument to impose power onto women. The ban on veiling is, in a sense, no different from the mandatory veiling, both of which claimed to “liberate” women. Both bans charged brutal discrimination, violent punishments, and ultimately the erasure and silence of women who were unjustly denied agency over their bodies.

The social media campaign and movement “White Wednesday,” started by Masih Alinejad in 2017, encourages women to publicly remove their white veils as an act of protest. The movement has resulted in some women being imprisoned, tortured, or “disappearing.”⁸ After the disappearance of a young woman known as “The Girl of

Enghelab Avenue,” images of her standing atop a utility box waving a white veil started circulating with the hashtag #Where_is_she.⁹ This form of censorship intends to make an example of those who choose to protest the Iranian government—to scare others into not participating in protest; however, in this case it had the opposite effect. In the wake of her absence, she became a symbol for the movement itself. Her image inspired other women to protest in solidarity.

Moreover, the Iranian music streaming website Melovaz Photoshopped women out of album covers in accordance with Iran’s censorship policies. What remains of the poorly Photoshopped images is an almost comical attempt to erase women. While male artists remain untouched, any trace of a woman in the album art is erased—even close-up images of lips are edited out. The attempt at erasure is made obvious by the remaining smudges and blurs. Recently, Melovaz has switched to a more “discreet” erasure, where instead of erasing women from original album covers, all female artists have the same red cover featuring their name and the word “discography” (unlike male artists, who have their original covers shown).

Any attempts at erasure always “leaves its trace in the very worlding of the world.”¹⁰ Simply put, one can never truly achieve nothingness. This erasure is another act of veiling, of “covering up” the body, which leaves an imprint on the album. What remains in this “void” is a small reflection of the harsh regulations women are subjugated to. As Salman Rushdie describes it in the *New Yorker*, “censorship is anti-creation, negative energy, uncreation, the bringing into being of non-being,” it is “the absence of presence.”¹¹ In other words, the absence of the body and of women is apparent and present in Iranian society. Phillip Toledano’s *Absent Portrait* documents the ban of images of women on packaging in Middle Eastern countries, including Iran. Toledano sourced censored

packaging from Iran, photographed them, and then isolated the censored *names* with Photoshop. The enlarged marker strokes have an almost stylistic and painterly quality to them, done with both care and violent intent. Both the censored album covers and Toledano's work highlight the marks left behind in a person's absence. The artwork brings light to the dehumanization of *people* and the absence of a body, of a person. Toledano states that:

What remains is a portrait. A portrait not of a person, but of the absence of a person. A religious point of view. A government. A cultural perspective, from a particular time and place in history. This is not a project about the Middle East, and how it sees (or doesn't see) *people*, although of course, that's a large part of it. It's about how politics and religion reconfigure reality in every culture. Some use marker pens, others use Fox news. It's up to us to choose to see it or not.¹²

Indeed, whether *names* are Photoshopped out of albums or meticulously effaced out of packaging by hand, what is left reflects a particular ideology. Even in terms of music production *names* are denied their own voice. Since the revolution music has been a topic of intense debate. It is difficult for *names* to produce music since it is illegal for *names* to sing in the presence of a male audience.¹³ *Names* in Iran are constantly and cruelly made aware of their non/existence under the political and religious realities they are subjected to.

“When the government was scared of their situation or stability, they started attacking women, by forcing them to cover themselves. They used to have buses on the street beside the malls, they would send police into the mall to capture women who are not fully covered. Maybe a part of their body or hair was showing or the way they dressed up is not according to their standards. I was always scared of the police, even though I was fully covered and I didn’t do anything. When I was passing by a guard or police there was this sudden feeling that something is going to happen. Maybe they will say something, maybe they will capture me and take me to prison. This feeling continued even when I moved to Canada at twenty-nine years old. It took me almost two years to get used to the idea of seeing police. During those two years whenever I saw an officer suddenly my hands would go to my hair, trying to find my scarf and pull it down, and I noticed there’s no scarf on my head and I’m not there anymore. That was a reaction I was used to and continued doing for years. Finally I got rid of it.”

– Nassrin O. 2019

Part 2: Dismembering the Body; Censorship as an Act of Violence



Figure 3. Jonathan Lundqvist, *Mind the Knee*, 2006.




Figure 4. Jonathan Lundqvist, *Another Fashion Piece*, 2006.



Figure 5. Jan Dirk Van Der Burg, *Censorship Daily*, 2012.

Censorship is often used as an act of dismemberment; to cut, tear, pull, rip, or otherwise remove parts of a person's body. Skin, the body's largest organ, is a vast and gendered surface that "conveys so much of an individual's identity."¹⁴ The organ is part of the integumentary system, which "protects and retains the body within" and is ingrained in our sense of defensiveness or strength.¹⁵ It is the surface we visually express ourselves with and the fragile container that separates the inside from the outside.¹⁶ We often make assumptions about a person's gender identity, religion, personality, or occupation based on the clothes they cover their skin in, the makeup applied, tattoos, or piercings. Censorship, in this sense, is targeted to particular parts of the body in which the skin showing is considered "offensive," such as the shoulders, neck, breasts, arms, legs, stomach, and so on. When censoring Western magazines, Sharpie-wielding Iranian officials target areas of the skin particularly associated with femininity by precisely mutilating those areas with black shapes. Another method of dissection includes placing rectangular stickers of different sizes and colours carefully over areas of the body that are exposed. Both the sexualization in Western magazines and the desexualization of women in Iran are, at least in some part, informed by the male gaze. Women's bodies, veiled or not, are "seen as vehicles of sexual desire."¹⁷ Negar Mottahedeh discusses the "commandment of looking," which, in opposition to the imperialist Western gaze, aims to eliminate stereotypical visuals of the Islamic world as barbarous and sexually exotic in Iranian cinema.¹⁸ It assumes that the presence of a nonfamilial male viewer gazing upon an unveiled woman is an "immodest, and hence reprehensible, relation of desire between the sexes."¹⁹

The choice to cover specific areas with a black shape, rather than Photoshopping clothes on or removing the pictures all together, is completely intentional; nothing is erased or has “disappeared.” The evidence of interference is made completely present.²⁰ Compared to the images discussed earlier, this attempt is not to make the body absent, but instead to cut off or dissect parts of the body and to dismember a woman’s agency over her femininity. Photoshopping the whole person out is, in a sense, impersonal; there is a screen that separates the hand from the image and no difficult decisions must be made. It is easier to completely erase a person than to decide how much skin is too much. With technology,  the censoring needs to be done only once and then it can be mass produced; here instead, the Iranian officials are meticulously going through pages one by one and censoring with a black marker. It is also somewhat ironic to consider a woman from the West as a victim of patriarchal violence at the hands of Iranian officials while also living under a different set of patriarchal conditions in which they must please the male gaze. Under this gaze, both in the West and Iran, women and their bodies are treated as objects, as flesh malleable under the patriarchal conditions they live under.

Houman Mortazavi’s 2007 work *1386 Nudes* featured a series of nude drawings of women self-censored by being cut into squares and pasted on top of each other in a “lopsided archive of inaccessible and barely identifiable fragments.”²¹ The body, whose skin is completely visible, is dehumanized, deconstructed, and defeminized through the act of violently cutting the paper so as to censor the figure.²² The materiality of the paper is made apparent in the absence of humanity; in other words, the roles of subject and object are reversed.²³ Elaine Scarry



Figure 6. Jonathan Lundqvist, *Fashion Piece*, 2006.

points out that in medical advertising, the iconography used to represent pain in the body is generally located in the hands or head since these are the areas most tied to our humanity and the ways in which we sense the outside world. Censorship of women depicted in commercial advertising and magazines is also targeted to certain parts of the body associated with femininity and a woman’s sense of humanity. Mortazavi denies the viewer the ability to locate humanity in the torn-up subjects, not unlike how the Iranian government denies women the ability to locate and determine their own sense of femininity and humanity within themselves. Even feminine dolls, which are in fact objects and not real people, are censored. This act of censoring dolls reflects the treatment of women as objects in multiple patriarchally dominated societies. Dolls are the deconstruction and reduction of a woman to a piece of flesh and the construction of an object that has no agency over itself. Dolls reflect the treatment of female bodies as sex objects for the male gaze in a Western context. The act of censoring dolls in Iran is also an act of dismemberment and the treatment of women as a piece of meat. The dissection of a woman’s body is ingrained in the Iranian psyche; women are constantly made aware of how they must present their bodies.

Part 3: Cutting off the Internet and Each Other

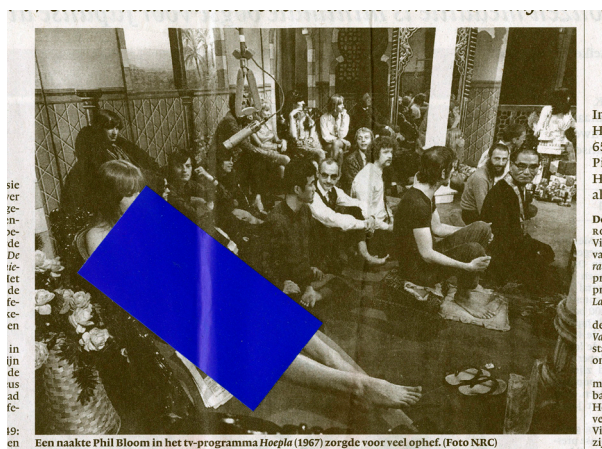


Figure 7. Jan Dirk Van Der Burg, *Censorship Daily*, 2012.

On November 15, 2019, protests broke out in cities across Iran ignited by a spike in fuel prices. The increase in fuel prices was an effort by the Iranian government to try and ease the pressure of the sanction-battered economy.²⁴ What quickly followed was some of the bloodiest crackdowns experienced in recent Iranian history, taking place in over one hundred cities, and an almost complete shutdown of the internet. The silence was deafening for many Iranians abroad whose families were in Iran at the time. A shortage of news coverage and the inability for many Iranians to contact friends and family within the country made it difficult to contextualize information. Eventually, videos displaying harrowing scenes of bloodied, injured, and dead protesters, burning vehicles and shops, and snipers on rooftops emerged the following week, once the internet was gradually restored. Physics explains that there is a physical connection between us all; “at the subatomic level there is a continual exchange of matter and energy” between ourselves and the people and environment around us. In the 1991 movie *Mindwalk*, physicist Sonia Hoffman (played

by Liv Ullmann) explains how “a particle has no independent existence”; rather, it exists in a set of relations that connects with other particles.²⁵ Our existence as human beings is ultimately part of an interconnected network of relationships.²⁶ As members of a collectivist culture, Iranians hold a deep-rooted commitment to their families and extended families; as a society their existence is seen as a whole body rather than as an individual.²⁷ However, due to migration and the displacement of Iranians, many rely on technology to communicate with family back home. Cellphones and encrypted communication apps, such as Telegram, have become the vital organ that not only supports family relationships but also acts as an instrument of receiving knowledge when the internet is blocked, or the news fails to do so.²⁸ When the only way to contact those living outside Iran is through the internet, the lack of this tool dismembers the already limited connections Iranians have to the outside world. Michael Foucault famously described conceptions of power in terms of knowledge and observation; having knowledge is having power.³⁰ As Adrian Shahbaz, research director for technology and democracy at Freedom House, describes it, the internet shutdown “is a desperate move to control all information in the country and to ensure that the government has a monopoly on information.”³¹ By cutting off the internet and restricting access to it for the majority of people, the government of Iran tries to keep the people ignorant in some respect. They do this to restrict their communication, organization, and free exchange of information with the rest of the world and in doing so deny them any power.

“Since I was young when we had to cover, I didn’t know why or what’s going on. Studying religion was mandatory at school, they were basically brainwashing us in a way that if you don’t cover your body or hair you’re going to hell. I was a very spiritual and sensitive person. Over time I thought I was going to hell. Even though we could wear what we want at home I always had a second thought that maybe I should cover myself so I can go to heaven. Later on when I was older, I hated the idea. I said this is my body and I can treat it the way I want to treat it. Not someone else saying you have to wear clothing like this or that. This is my deciding to my own body, not other people.”

– Nassrin 0

"I found out when I tried to contact my family and I wasn't able to get through to them. I didn't know what's going on until I saw a video clip on Instagram, seeing people on the street, throwing stones at cars, the police were throwing stones at regular people's cars when they were passing by. That just scared me. I was so scared, I just wanted to be able to talk to my family and make sure they're okay. Finally, I got a phone plan and I was able to call them. I felt like I'm back to 22 years ago when I first came to Canada, at that time we didn't have smartphones. I felt like I was back in time. I felt like I am again so far away from my family, I cannot feel them anymore, I'm not going to know how they are doing, what's going on, what's going to happen to them, or what might have happened to them."³²

[REDACTED]

For many Iranians living abroad, away from their families in Iran, the internet is vital in connecting with one another. Those living in Iran have almost no way of expressing their situation to the rest of the world or letting their family know if they are okay. This is the Iranian government's way of preventing the organization of people into protest and to prevent outrage and pressure from the rest of the world.

Conclusion

Though the issue of censorship in Iran is an ongoing one with no end in sight, moving forward, there is an urgency and responsibility for news organizations to investigate and spread knowledge of the people who have been denied their right to voice their harsh realities. When a government censors, it is ultimately done with the intention of preventing free speech and the organization of rebellions. The past four years of sanctions from the Trump administration have caused Iran's economy to spiral, resulting in mass protests. These sanctions have ultimately hurt vulnerable people, including women, children, the elderly, and those with medical conditions. The disappearances of women from media and in Iran and the censorship of free communication are an effort by the Iranian government to avoid another revolution from citizens who are fed up and to set an example of potential consequences. At its core, censorship in Iran is a means to retain a monopoly over power whether it be through covering or erasing an individual and their place in society, dismembering an individual's agency over their choice, or denying communication and knowledge, and therefore power, to the people. The Iranian government tries to erase women from albums and, more generally, from society. Yet, the silencing of women is heard loud and clear, from the traces left behind on poorly Photoshopped albums, to the legacy of the Girl of Enghelab Avenue. Other times, the Iranian government enacts censorship less discreetly, by using the thick, violent strokes of a marker or multicoloured rectangular papers, targeting areas most associated with femininity and one's sense of humanity. In doing so, they dehumanize women and

dismember their agency over self-expression. Despite the Iranian government's attempts to stifle free speech and expression, the Iranian people continue to resist the oppressive regime and look towards a future of freedom. ✨

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