Hidden Swallows

The role of female agents in Iranian intelligence practices

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Abstract

This study analyzes how Iranian intelligence agencies use female agents referred to as swallows to conduct honey-traps against specific targets. Furthermore, the study critically reflects on the role of female agents within the context of the Iranian security system with reference to Manjikian's (2020) theory of queer intelligence. Since the Iranian state is based on strict gender-segregation laws, the interplay between the use of swallows within this system, will be reviewed. For this a total of twenty-four English and Farsi online news articles have been reviewed, coded, and analyzed. In addition, the gendered dimension that comes with the language used within the online news articles will be critically assessed. The analysis concludes that Iranian women are indeed being used as swallows for honey-trapping opposing voices yet much of the recruitment tactics, motivations and background information is left in secrecy. It is evident that the use of swallows by Iranian intelligence agencies includes an inherently gendered-dimension due to the official theocratic nature of the Iranian state, yet this is contrasted by its willingness to secretly use female agents for methods of seduction.

Keywords: Gender Studies, Intelligence Studies, Iran, Iranian Intelligence Agencies, Qualitative Content Analysis.

Acknowledgements

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To Woman, Life, Freedom.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIT	Critical Intelligence Theory
HUMINT	Human-Intelligence
IRGC	Iranian-Revolutionary-Guard-Corps
KGB	Central Security Committee of the USSR
MOIS	Iranian Central Intelligence Ministry
OSINT	Open-Source-Intelligence
QCA	Qualitative-Content-Analysis
SAVAMA	First Revolutionary Iranian Intelligence Agency
SAVAK	Central Iranian Intelligence Agency of the Persian Monarchy

Hidden Swallows - The role of female agents in Iranian intelligence practices -
A gendered analysis on how Iranian intelligence agencies use female agents to honeytrap targets.

Introduction

Iranian intelligence and counterintelligence missions are gaining increasing popularity for analysis within the scholarly sphere during the past two decades (Golkar, 2012). Due to the geopolitical power of Iran as a state but also its heavy repression of any oppositional voice, internally and externally,

the analysis of Iran's intelligence agencies' use of spies poses an interesting sphere (Akbarzadeh et. al, 2019). Within the past three decades, Iran's intelligence agencies increasingly use Human-Intelligence (HUMINT) and the cyberspace to identify and silence potential targets that pose a threat to the ideological legitimacy of the Iranian regime. In the 1990s for instance, the famous singer Fereydoun Farrokhzad, who had escaped from Iran to Bonn, Germany a few years after the revolution in 1979, was murdered in his appartement by Iranian spies since he was a vocal critic of the Iranian regime (Banerjea, 2015). However, in contrast to the case of Farrokhzad, which presents a method that fits the Iranian intelligence and Iranian state image, the increasing news articles about female agents used for honey-trapping present a contradiction to the official state and intelligence agencies narratives.

Upon reviewing the above-mentioned Iran-specific case, it is important to understand the connection between sex-espionage/honey-trapping and the wider intelligence context. Sex-espionage, also known as honey-trapping has gained some level of academic attention within the past three decades (Momi, 2022). Since the topic contains many stigmas due to the importance of seduction for the execution of the method, the academic intelligence realm did not analyze the cases of sex-espionage until the 1980s (Crenshaw, 1991). Only after the de-classification of CIA and KGB documents about their use of female agents for sex-espionage, the phenomenon also gained the attention of the Western scholarly realm (Sharoni et. al, 2016). The cases of the female agents, also named *swallows*, have since the past three decades been looked at and analyzed in more detail. Since the rise of critical theories in the Global North, did theories such as feminism break up the taboo around sex-espionage. Until then, many scholars did neither take female agents, nor the practice serious enough for a scientific study (Ukova, 2016). However, there is a great advantage for analyzing the cases of female swallows conducting honey-traps of targets, since

they do not only serve as one of the oldest professions in the world (West, 2009), but also shed light on an important issue within the intelligence scholarly field.

A gendered dimension on the diversity of roles women take on within the field is important since the latter is understudied in the intelligence field that is causes many prejudices against the women (Hieber, 2005). As Manjikian (2020) has elaborated in-depth in her book *Gender, Sexuality and Intelligence* which will serve as the theoretical grounds for this study, the issue of espionage and intelligence agencies can be considered as having a great gender dimension in general. States having official and unofficial narratives, spies with mysterious backgrounds and methods that cannot be aligned with the official state image, depict a queer dimension of espionage and intelligence collection. Manjikian's (2020) theory falls under the umbrella of critical intelligence studies, a field that since the last decade has increased in popularity with many intelligence scholars analyzing new- but also re-analyzing older phenomena with a new and critical angle (Bean, 2018). As for the analytical part of this study, the analysis of the online news articles will be conducted from a critical gendered perspective with the aim to present how the framing of the issue within news articles has an impact on the concept of the Iranian swallow.

The term swallow was mentioned first in Iranian news media in 1997 (Golkar, 2012). The latter leaked that an Iranian member of Parliament used a corruption scheme to cash out state money. The news circled around the Iranian society, took people in shook as they started to question the legitimacy of the theocratic pillars on which the Iranian regime has been built. A few days afterwards, the same member of Parliament was caught having a romantic relationship with an unknown young and attractive woman (Golkar, 2012). This caused a scandal among the Iranian news media close to the Iranian regime, with many of them stating that the man was rotten from the beginning, thus the corruption and the romantic relationship he pursued were not facilitated by the

political instiutions (Zehtabi, 2021). A few days after the scandal, the young woman that had pursued the romantic relationship with the MP disappeared with her name and identity getting erased from the registration systems. The media and Iranians as well as many politicians started to question if this woman was intentionally hired to pursue a relationship with the MP (Zehtabi, 2021). This could indicate that the Iranian intelligence sent someone after him to diminish the scandal of the corrupt political system that facilitates bribery among members of parliament (Ra'ees & Kamal, 2019). Soon after, terms such as swallow emerged in speeches of MPs, in mouth-to mouth propaganda and mainly within Farsi newspapers (Kar, 2007). Fast forward, nearly three decades later, the term s*wallow* has manifested itself within the discourse of Iranian intelligence agencies. It refers to the phenomenon of a mysterious woman that is allegedly implemented by the Iranian intelligence agency to pursue a romantic relation with a target, which is also called the honey-trap (Kar, 2007). However, this phenomenon was neither confirmed nor denied by any active member of one of Iran's twelve different intelligence agencies and branches. It is only through interviews and reports in online news articles that some light has been shed on the phenomenon, yet without any actual in-depth focus.

The media thus plays a crucial role when it comes to reporting and labelling the women as swallows apparently. This is also showcased by other cases of female agents from the Global North. One of the most striking yet troublesome stories related to this is that of Odette Hallowes, also known as Odette Swanson (West, 2009). She was working as a spy for the United Kingdom during the Second World War and stationed in occupied France to spy on German officers. After one of her colleagues deflected to the Germans, she was put into prison of the Gestapo and subject to month-long torture and interrogations, including the burning of her back and her toenails being ripped out. After that, she was sent to the concentration camp in Ravensbrück in 1943 which she survived. Her story of bravery led to her getting many prizes and

medals of honor by the United Kingdom and France after the Second World War. However, even though her story is one of remarkable bravery, a general discourse within the news articles of that time were her looks and physical appearance, such as her body-shape, the type of hairstyle and clothes she was wearing (West, 2009). These types of framings were not found from the news reports about male agents. However, it took nearly three decades for the intelligence scholarly field to become aware of the differences in reporting between male and female intelligence agents, and how women were often belittled to their physical looks and not credited full agency for their successes (Olmsted, 2004). Apart from Odette Hallowes, women that were particularly used for sex-espionage contained and still are followed by many prejudices and stigmas that are perpetuated throughout the media and the intelligence scholarly field. In cases outside of the Global North, there is little to almost no literature on current missions of female swallows being used for honey-trapping targets (Olmsted, 2004). This makes the case of Iranian swallows even more interesting since it does not only offer insights on the phenomenon, but also presents a under researched cultural and socio-political context outside of the Global North. Particularly Iran presents a country which has had throughout its history issues with sustaining regime legitimization and stability, particularly after the revolution in 1979. This makes the analysis of the Iranian swallows important as it present an historical instance outside of the Global North.

Motivation and current context

Since September 2022 and the murder of Jina (Mahsa) Amini by the Iranian morality police, the role of women within the Iranian state system is being questioned, particularly how women are being viewed and valued within the context of security and intelligence apparatuses (Serscikov, 2023). Since evidence shows that it is the security and intelligence apparatuses that arrest, demoralize, imprison, and kill women for a variety of reasons, the analysis of the

phenomenon of the swallow offers an interesting critical perspective on the issue since the swallows are being used by the intelligence apparatus and not seen as targets. Iran's intelligence apparatus is known for arbitrary arrests, torture and pressuring captives to make statements in Iran's state tv, where they are forced to swear loyalty to the Iranian regime (Reza-Rashti, 2015). In many of these cases, the relatives and friends of the prisoners are being threatened as well.

In addition, a new report by Amnesty International (2023) highlights how the intelligence agencies are directly linked to the torture and abuse of men, women but also children in official- but also in secret prisons which are distributed around the state. There is evidence that Iranian intelligence agencies use harsher methods on prisoners from Iran's ethnic groups such as the Kurdish, Arabs, Balochs, Lors, Gilakis or Azeris (Amnesty International, 2023). With this precedence, it proves an interesting perspective during the current turmoil to analyze especially the role of female agents used by Iran's intelligence agencies to silence opposing voices. Even though this part of Iran's intelligence agencies methods can be considered as smaller in its significance within the current political context, it does show an important aspect of Iran's security system. This is because the stigma that is connected to the female swallows leaves most of the people talk about it solely through rumors with a condescending undertone (Serscikov, 2023). A scientific analysis on the topic will however not only shed light on what a swallow is within the Iranian context, what the known cases are, and how the media reports about, but also why seemingly powerful yet conservative intelligence agencies such as MOIS, use swallows for certain tasks. Due to the violent history of Iran's intelligence agencies dealing with Iranians and especially Iranian women inside of Iran but also in some counterintelligence operations outside of the country there is a legitimate concern on a potential use of force against the women (Wege, 2019). Therefore, the motivation for this study not only stems from the fact that the

topic is lacking research, but also because the nexus between the authoritarian and oppressive nature of the Iranian regime paired with the secrecy and prejudices around the women conducting the honey-trapping leaves a fascinating space to investigate. It is especially because of these times of turmoil and regime instability within Iran, that even the smallest facets and stories of its security and intelligence apparatus will benefit the general discourse around the topic (Serscikov, 2023).

Positionality statement

The ontological premises of this study will be based on pluralist, structural and feminist theories. As Peshkin (1988) has elaborated, social scientists will not be able to conduct a study with full objectivity. One must begin with the premise that subjectivity is inevitable, therefore one must systematically and actively seek out one's subjectivity during the research (Peshkin, 1988). In addition, it is acknowledged that every theory contains a variety of perspectives, with full objectivity not possible to be reached. However, to enable a high degree of scientific correctness, this study recognizes the subjectivity of the author that will play a role in the gathering and analysis of the data. Therefore, this paragraph will outline the ontological premises of this study, highlighting the authors personal reference to the topic (Peshkin, 1988).

The structural feminist thought entails that the world system is created by humans and does not follow any rational order. Humans as individuals cannot contain an encompassing rational objectivity since we are influenced by our experiences, emotions, and thoughts. This is as true for an artist as it is for a political figure. Even though the political figure is supposed to make a rational decision based on what is best for the state yet depending on the historical period and the type of state, one can observe a variety of ways in which *the best* has been defined. For instance, Genghis Khan (1167-1227) who expanded the

Mongol empire and slaughtered a significant number of individuals that crossed his way, defined *the best* as the steady yet brutal expansion of his empire (Ingiriis, 2020). On the other hand, the present state of Bhutan is considered as one of the most ecologically efficient states in the world without being dependent on the geopolitical system. Here *the best* in Bhutan's definition is connected to ecological efficiency (Ingiriis, 2020). As shown in the context of authoritarian regimes such as Iran, *the best for the state* does exclude evidentially most of the Iranian civil society yet prioritizes a strong geopolitical and militarized role.

With consideration to the authors subjective view on the topic, it is evident that the analysis of the gathered data will be influenced by the fact that the author is from a family of Iranians in exile who due to their political background are not able to go back to Iran. From a subjective point of view, the author is critical towards the system of the Iranian regime, as someone born into a family of political refugees and as a woman. These sentiments will eventually influence the analysis and discussion of the data even though the collection and organization will follow a scientifically approved systematic structure. Peshkin (1988) recommends an explanation of one's subjective stance prior to the literature review and the analysis to offer the reader a fair view into the perspective of the author as part of seeking subjectivity. In this way, one can potentially raise the objectivity as well as scientific correctness throughout the analysis.

Literature Review

This section will assess the existing literature on the nexus between the phenomenon of swallows, the Iranian intelligence, and its gendered dimension.

The existence of female spies has been documented since several centuries with women taking on a variety of different roles. Most literature

concerned with the issue of women and espionage deal with cases in the Global North in the period of the 20th century (Wheelwright, 2019). The literature discusses real cases of women used for espionage, yet also compares these cases to fictional movies. The latter saw an increase in the portrayal of female spies in Hollywood movies in the 20th century (Wheelwright, 2019). The fascination of social scientists but also fictional novelists for espionage in general does not come as a surprise. The role of the spy carries a certain amount of mystery with herself, never fully disclosing her identity and executing tasks that come with a great amount of power and responsibility.

This literature review will first address when the phenomenon of swallows was recorded first as well as presenting how female agents are being perceived within the context of intelligence agencies. Then the existing literature on the gendered perspective concerning women in intelligence and particularly in Iranian intelligence will be elaborated, highlighting how the general academic consensus views the swallows and if there is a difference between the analysis of male vs. female swallows. Then the information at hand about the Iranian intelligence agencies will be summarized, placing the role of the swallows into the country's historical context. In this way, the research gaps and the scientific contribution of this study will be highlighted.

Female agents; Spying, Deceiving and Honey-trapping?

The history of female agents used by intelligence agencies dates to the creation of states themselves (Ingiriis, 2020). Female agents were not only used for spying on enemies of the empire but also within the high courts of the empire itself to identify traitors. These agents were active in all social and economic classes, ranging from the ordinary washing woman and household maids up to counsellors of the queens and princesses (Akkermann, 2018). As Akkermann (2018) elaborates, it is common to think of female agents as the one's that use

seduction and pillow talking as their main strategy, however since women were not being taken seriously and were seen as intellectually inferior to men, they used this societal invisibility as an advantage to eavesdrop, write letters with invisible ink and lie as part of their spying methods (Akkermann, 2018). These cases of female spies can be traced back to 2500 B.C in different parts of the world (Mijalkovic, 2014). In ancient Thailand, the Mauyra Kings used female spies to infiltrate the courts of rival kingdoms (Rout, 2016, p. 42). Similarly, Richmond (2009) highlights how in ancient Greece (2500 B.C) female agents were actively used for seducing and eavesdropping on rival kings and their courts to gain valuable information about their plans. In ancient Persia (3000 B.C) women played a crucial role in the ruling and planning of the expansion of the empire. Consequently, female, and male spies in ancient Persia were used for eavesdropping, lying but mainly seducing rivals to gain valuable information (Ingiriis, 2020).

Therefore, until the 20th century, female spies were regularly used by empires, noblemen and kingdoms, operating in the secret space with most of their names and stories vanished with time (Akkermann, 2018). However, the actual term of *the swallow* did not gain popularity until the former Soviet Union Intelligence Agency Committee for State Security (KGB) declassified documents where it showed that during the Cold War, Soviet men and women were trained as swallows and crows specifically for the art of seduction of enemies, also known as honey-trapping (Sharoni et. al, 2021). These trainings were conducted in secret locations around Siberia in the 1980s (Dodds, 2011, p. 3). The period of the Cold War signified a new chapter of an "arms race" (Sharoni et. al, 2021, p. 45) in spying methods between the East and the West. Scholars from both sides started to use the term swallow from the 1990s onwards to specifically describe a female spy that uses the method of honey-trapping for either extracting information or luring the target to a specific place (Hieber, 2005).

In addition, the term swallow is specifically being used for women that work for the state, not against it (Momi, 2022). Probably the most famous and one of the earliest known cases of honey-trapping is Mata Hari, an exotic dancer from the Netherlands that was allegedly used by the German Intelligence in World War 1. It is speculated that the Germans hired her to travel to France to collect important information about the French war strategy. For this, she supposedly was using honey-trapping methods to obtain information from high-ranking French officials. However, Mata Hari got caught on her stay in France and executed by the French in 1917. Even though she stated until her execution that she was neither hired by the Germans nor shared any important information with the latter, it was the way she was presenting herself as a strong woman that determined for the French intelligence agencies that she *cannot not* be dangerous (Hieber, 2005). In this way, the patriarchal system and strict gender norms of that time can be partially seen as a reason for her execution. After her execution it was revealed that she indeed did not share any valuable information with the Germans and her being a swallow or not did not influence the outcome of Germany's war strategy (Momi, 2022). However, Mata Hari as the exotic and mysterious spy, this image coined the term swallow within the future discourse of the phenomenon.

An interesting intersection of the phenomena swallows and honey-trapping is that these terms are not only discussed by intelligence scholars, but also by authors of fictional novels and movies with the post-World War 1 period (Dodds, 2011, p. 4). Therefore, one can observe a rapid increase in the production of English-speaking war movies with portraying female spies that use honey-trapping to capture targets (Dodds, 2011, p. 1). Therefore, the swallow has become an overlapping point for scholars between reality and fiction, mystery and facts, true and false narratives. As Shahan (2019) elaborates, some of the fictional stories are in fact based on true biographies of

former female spies, yet most of the time, the stories around the female spy are heavily romanticized and essentialized in the portrayal of the former. This has the consequence that the audience cannot distinguish reality from fiction anymore, confusing the idealized stories of swallows with the actual narratives of former female spies (Dodds, 2011, p. 5; Shahan, 2019).

Most of the archived and written biographies of swallows specifically conducting honey-trapping methods are recorded during the period starting with World War 1 in 1914 until the ends of the Cold War in 1991 (Taylor, 2008). Most of these cases in turn are recorded from the Global North, including swallows working for the KGB, CIA or for the British Intelligence. However, the literature lacks in presenting distinguished cases of female agents especially from the Middle East and with regards to the honey-trapping method (Hieber, 2005). Most cases within the Middle Eastern context revolve around female spies used in the times of ancient empires such as the Persian Empire or the Ottoman Empire (Wege, 2019). Nevertheless, the field of academic intelligence lacks structured contemporary analyses of female spies used in the Global South, particularly in Iran, with the latter presenting a significant geopolitical force outside of the Global North (Hieber, 2005). This can be reasoned due to the higher levels of authoritarian systems outside of the Global North, which is in many cases linked to a non-transparent, hierarchical, and closed intelligence system, with little information being available for analyzing the intelligence methods and strategies (Hieber, 2005; Taylor, 2008; Shahan, 2019).

In sum, it can be concluded that most scholars agree about the importance of female agents in general and particularly during the First, Second and Cold War (Hieber, 2005; Taylor, 2008; Momi, 2022). In this way, there are several instances in which swallows are being increasingly mentioned, particularly in connection with the KGB and its infiltration of Western states (Ackermann, 2018). In addition, the media did report extensively about the

swallows and female agents, yet in most cases decided to include comments about their physical appearance, age, and their ability for seducing the targets, even in cases where the female agent was executing other tasks (Taylor,1998). Another instance presents Elsbeth Schragmüller also known as "Madmoiselle Docteur" (Hieber, 2005, p. 111) was a German spy during the First World War who was conducting regular espionage tactics, far away from seduction methods. However, German, and French media predominately focused on her appearance, how she was not as everyone thought with one intelligence scholar even describing her during that time as a "sour-old woman" (Hieber, 2005, p. 111). In this way, the interplay between female agents and the narratives of them presented in the media plays a crucial role in the general discourse of how female agents and especially those being considered swallows are perceived.

However, some exceptions to the rule include the reversed honey-trapping, where intelligence agents fell victim to the luring of the target. One instance includes that of CIA agent Daniela Greene, who fell victim to one of the most famous terrorists of the Islamic State (ISIS), the former German citizen and rapper Dennis Cuspert aka Deso-Dogg who changed his name to Abu Talha al-Almani after joining ISIS in 2014 (Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2019). Greene had the task of creating a romantic bond with Cuspert over a communication application and lur him to Turkey from Syria where he would then be arrested. In a turn of events, Greene fell for Cusperts words, secretly travelled to Turkey, and later announced that she joined the ISIS caliphate and became Cusperts wife (Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2019). This instance represents one of the most famous cases of the reversed honey-trap, showing that HUMINT Operations such as the one where Greene was hired, ultimately concern regular humans with emotions. It also emphasizes the new cyberspace which has become an integral part of honey-trapping operations, with many targets being first contacted through applications on the internet (Broinowski, 2022). Therefore, within the intelligence context, swallows also use honey-trapping methods

through the cyberspace, with the latter causing a change within the discourse and approaches of the tactic slowly since the last decade (Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2019).

The connection to the gender dimension

Bean (2018) has made a significant contribution to the intelligence scholarly field by emphasizing the importance of including critical intelligence studies (CIT) to progress the discourse around various themes within the intelligence field. Since intelligence-stakeholders mainly use theories and the language of Western-centric realist and liberal theories, there has not been much critical reflection about the actual neutrality of the intelligence discourses and practices (Scott, 1986). However, as Butler (1988) elaborates, real power is produced through language and the reinforcement of specific norms that again produce power imbalance, leaving women thus the gender aspect invisible and taken for granted. It's the sociopolitical, cultural and security context that decides how information is shaped, distributed and consumed, when it comes to news articles and scholarly literature concerning intelligence (Butler, 1998; Crenshaw, 1991) The field has for a long time not considered voices of marginal groups and standpoints, which makes the thought behind CIT significant for future progress of the intelligence scholarly field. As Bean (2018) highlights, language constructs and reflects the social context of speech, determining what is seen as important and what not. Therefore, CIT aims to re-make words such as *intelligence* or *agent* with a critical reflection on them rather than taking them as a black-box unit.

Secondly, CIT lives from the progression of built-up hypotheses, therefore it is necessary to criticize and reflect on already existing narratives. Burrows (2014, p. 15) emphasizes that the meaning of intelligence is not *fixed through the words yet stabilized through the rhetoric* in which it is used. CIT

does not aim to offer problem-solving practical tactics but sees language and its re-construction as source for institutional change instead of the perpetuation of old power dynamics (Burrows, 2014, p. 4). It aims to show how the dialectics used in intelligence field are connected to the societal discourse with the media. The critical theorist outlook is broad since it includes a variety of new theories, yet they all have the aim to analyze processes from a new perspective (Bean, 2018). Therefore, intelligence studies particularly benefit from the critical perspective from new theories, including feminism, post-structuralism, and de-colonialism. These theories contain voices from marginalized groups including women and non-western perspectives to promote critical reflection and change. Its aim is to show the sociocultural, political and security context that shape how information is gathered, processed, disseminated, and consumed (Bean, 2018). Therefore, this study will particularly look at how news articles process and distributed the information on the topic.

Scott (1986) and Crenshaw (1991), one of the first two feminist security scholars emphasize the need for critical security studies that include the voices of women and women of color. They further highlight that the word *gender* itself is being chosen intentionally over the word *women* to highlight the contrastive nature of the word and emphasize the political acceptability of the field since word *gender* is perceived more neutral and objective than the word *women*. In the context of female spies, Scott (1986) elaborates how the history of the intelligence field of the Global North lacks a holistic gendered perspective that is built onto empirical research. Her suggestion of including gender as a broad category that uses the intersections of other categories such as race and class laid a foundation that enabled a more nuanced scientific examination of intelligence processes within the past four decades, further reinforcing the importance of critical intelligence studies, particularly when it comes to women of color and processes in the Global South (Crenshaw, 1991).

Butler (1988) further emphasizes how power and gender are interdependent concepts. The power within norm setting of gender determines how one can appear in public spaces, how much power one gender has and what the mainstream gender norms are. The performativity of gender within the political realm is tied to the power structure of the specific realm (Bean, 2018). It is exactly this interplay between gender and power that makes the issue of the female honeytrap spy an interesting phenomenon since it includes a practical instance were the dynamic between both concepts is shown in real life cases.

The literature on the topic of female agents in general in the past until now shows that the role of female agents does not necessarily deviate much of that of male agents. The immediate imagery of female spies being seductive can be associated to the rise of spy movies in the 20th century, with female spies being essentialized much to their appearance. As Sharoni et. al (2016) elaborate in their book *Handbook of Gender and War* female agents also labelled as swallows conducting honey-trapping operations became heavily romanticized after movies such as Odette or the Bamboo Prison (1950s), gained substantial amount of popularity during the 20th century. Hieber (2005) further elaborates that the already existing prejudices against female agents got increased through the popularity of the spy fiction movies and novels. Female agents in the US and UK for instance were seen as inferior to men with less intellectual capabilities and rotten in their ability to being a spy due to their inherent emotional nature (Sharoni et. al, 2016). However, as Taylor (1998) highlights, female spies including swallows had a substantial role in information gathering and participating in D-Day events that facilitated many big events such as the great fight in the Normandie in 1944 (Shahan, 2019). This stands in direct disconnection to the scholarly consensus on female spies during that time (Richmond, 2009). Moghissi (2008) highlights that while there is an obvious gendered dimension to female agents, the issue of swallows who do use seduction methods for trapping their targets cannot be seen as an exception of a

spy. Burrows (2014, p. 7) adds that a spy has the duty to fulfill a variety of different roles and "become" a different persona to be able to fulfill their mission successfully, hence using honey-trapping is indeed a more personal and sexualized form of the task, yet it cannot be treated with less of seriousness. It is solely the gender binary and controversy that surrounds the word "swallow" and the method "honey-trapping" which makes an elaboration of its gendered dimension crucial for a scientific review of it, enabling a holistic overview on the matter at hand (Butler, 2019).

Another famous instance includes that of Anna Chapman, with her being on the forefront on the modern discourse around how a swallow should be and look like (Broinowski, 2022). Anna Chapman had received training through Russian intelligence agencies and was living in the US since 2004. She was collecting valuable information about US politics and security strategies and reporting back to Russia until she and other Russian intelligence agents were caught in 2010. A prisoner's swap freed her from the US, and she started a life as a moderator and model in Russia from 2014 onwards. Chapman, even though not conducting actual honey-traps, got to know as Agent 90-60-90, with many newspapers and intelligence agents admiring her beauty and sexuality, thus labeling her the Mata Hari of modern times (Broinowski, 2022). The sexualization of Anna Chapman ultimately resulted in the medias' framing of her as a swallow, since her physical attributes and appearance, similarly to Mata Hari, were enough to see her capabilities solely on the side of seduction (Sharoni et. al, 2016). Therefore, the gendered aspect of swallows lays in the fact that women will always first be exposed and reduced to their looks and appearances, no matter how efficient their work as a spy has been.

Taylor (2009) further describes the phenomenon of Vietnamese female swallows that were used for the Viet Cong in the Vietnam war that not only used the advantage of their looks to seduce officers, but in some cases purposefully

portrayed themselves dumber and in one instance even as "crazy" (p. 62) to be seen as harmless inferior females. This tactic allowed the officials to relax and openly talk about plans and attacks, with the swallows directly reporting these back. Therefore, while there is a real element of controversy and reinforcing gendered stereotypes when it comes to swallows using honey-trapping, scholars such as Burrows (2014), Hieber (2005), Taylor (1998) and Brooks (2019) underline the importance of not looking down at these women since most of the times they were already looked down at, treated differently and not taken serious even though their missions gathered very valuable information. The objectification of the female body within the intelligence scholarship has been widely accepted and reproduced with scholars only within the past two decades actively criticizing the male-dominated narratives of what makes a good spy, aiming to move away from the gender binary (Scott, 1986). Ironically the creation of the above-mentioned crow and swallow schools by the KGB prove the first recent instance where the definition of a honey-trapping spy moves away from the gender binary and actively presents an instance where both genders were used to target enemies (Broinowski, 2022).

In sum, the gendered dimension of the female spy presents a variety of perspectives and a complexity in its articulation and expression, depending on date, time, and context of the appearance of the female spy. In the specific context of the swallow, the issue becomes increasingly more complicated since female spies used for honey trapping are exposed to a room full of stigmas from the patriarchal and male-dominated intelligence structure in almost every country but also from the heavy romanticization within movies and the media (Crenshaw, 1991). Therefore, it is significant to consider the gendered dimension when critically assessing the role of female spies for honey-trapping, offering a more nuanced and less biased view on the cases. This also enables further scientific credibility of critical studies within the intelligence field since

these theories are often not being met with the necessary seriousness as they should (Akkermann, 2018).

Iranian intelligence agencies, female agents, and the Iranian state system

The last part of the literature review will focus on the political and security-specific context of Iran's intelligence and general state structure and how it is connected to the gendered perspective highlighted throughout the study. However, upon reviewing the literature on the Iranian state, the complex Iranian intelligence apparatus will be elaborated for further placing the role of female spies into Iran's security and political context.

Table 1 (Stratfor, 2020)

As seen in Table 1 above, Iran's intelligence agency structure presents a hierarchy, with the Supreme Leader being the most powerful figure. Its modern intelligence system is built on the former Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's SAVAK (Sazemane- Etelat va Amniat Keshwar) from1957 (Wege, 2019). After

the revolution in 1979, the new Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini with the support of the Palestine Liberation Organization's intelligence entity Jihaz al Razd created a new intelligence agency called SAVAMA (Sazemane Etelaat va Amniate Melli). However, SAVAMA transitioned after a few years to the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS, Vezarate Etalat va Amniate Keshwar), in 1984. The ministry adopted new standards where every minister and high-ranking intelligence official had to be a religiously trained Islamic authority. A structure that persists until the present day. Another branch of intelligence emerged from the IRGC called the IRGC-Intelligence Organization as well as Iran's military creating its own intelligence unit, both occurring during the 1990s. These units do seldomly cooperate and even compete for the most of power (Wege, 2019).

As Serscikov (2023) has outlined, even though Iran contains advanced intelligence organizations, the two leading ones are the MOIS and the IRGC-IO. Both have advanced their OSINT, SOCMINT but also HUMINT and Cybersecurity skills, particularly after the Stuxnet attack in 2007 (Serscikov, 2023). He further emphasizes that Iran is surrounded by countless states that see Iran as an enemy including Saudi-Arabia, the UAE and particularly Israel with the latter having one of the strongest counterintelligence units called the Mossad (Serscikov, 2023). Therefore, it is to no surprise that Iran spends most of its expenditures on sustaining and advancing its security and intelligence structure (Anderson & Sadjadpour, 2018). A total of thirty thousand Iranians are part of the MOIS and more than three hundred-thousand-foot soldiers can potentially become part of the IRGC intelligence forces. As mentioned above all intelligence institutions, known and unknown, are obliged to report back to the Supreme Leader, currently being Khamenei since Khomeini's death in 1989. Therefore, within the Iranian intelligence system no greater operation occurs without the political elite's knowledge (Anderson & Sadjadpour, 2018) However, there are no publicly known recruitment mechanisms for the IRGC,

J2 Military intelligence and other possible intelligence units that are officially documented (Wege, 2019). Wege (2019) elaborates that:

"The most robust selection process, from a counterintelligence standpoint, is that of the MOIS. It begins with the recruitment of individuals having specific subject majors, with testing in Hamedan in western Iran, followed by nine- to twenty-four-month investigations, then by further specialized intelligence training at Tehran's Imam Bagher University, and an initial assignment to relevant provincial intelligence offices. By contrast, admission to the Revolutionary Guard is as simple as the enlistment option to fulfill one's military service obligations" (Wege, 2019).

The Iranian intelligence apparatus can thus be considered as a complex machinery that includes more than half a million members spread across the different units with all of them standing under direct control of the Iranian Supreme Leader. In addition, as Golkar (2012) emphasizes, Iran's HUMINT capabilities are one of the strongest not only inside the country but also overseas and in the cybersphere. A recent instance of the Iranian intelligence apparatus mission includes the failed kidnapping of activist Masih Alinejad in 2021, where Iranian agents (unknown from which branch) plotted a plan for kidnapping Alinejad from the US to Venezuela and then taking her back to Iran (Moniquet, 2022). These planning and (sometimes) execution of these missions are possible through a complex net of Iranian spies all over the world who execute operations in the cybersphere but also in person, aiming to target and silence a great amount of dissent voices. This phenomenon is one of the main goals for the existence of the Iranian intelligence units (Moniquet, 2022). As Sercikov (2023) has outlined, the Iranian regime is unstable since it has repeatedly failed to listen to the Iranian peoples demands for economic stability and reform of the conversative laws, resulting in outbursts of the population in 2017, 2019 and since 2022, leaving more than three thousand victims that fell from the bullets of the Iranian police and military alone. To further suppress opposing voices, the Iranian intelligence units have perfectionated their HUMNIT and cyber

skills to effectively target and silence those that voice opposition and have gained a valuable amount of popularity (Sercikov, 2023). It is also important to highlight that Iran is a multiethnic country, with particularly the Kurdish minority in the West, the Arab minority in the South, the Baloch Minority is the Southeast and the Azeri minority in the Northwest being frequent targets of Iran's internal intelligence operations (Ra'ees & Kamal, 2019). In sum, the Iranian intelligence structure is created for a great part for silencing the voices of the opposition, with each operation being confirmed by the religious and political elite at the top. This makes the use of potential swallows by Iranian intelligence agencies even more interesting in this context.

However, there is no information on the possibility of recruiting swallows through this system, as it is rather speculated that the women are either forced into the role or persuaded through financial promises (Moghissi, 2008). This does not stem from nowhere since the structure of the Iranian state can be considered as inherently gender segregated. Within this structure of the intelligence branches, women do have roles such as secretaries and lower-ranking responsibilities. There is no woman in a high-ranking authority position since women are not considered as capable enough according to Iran's former intelligence minister Hossein Taeb (Serscikov, 2023). Kar (2007), Moghissi (2008) and Nobel-Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi (2009) all have highlighted that the political and security structure of the Iranian state can be considered a gender apartheid or two-class citizen systems. Kar (2007) emphasizes the patriarchal and gender-segregated laws on which the Iranian system has been built. A few of the laws include that women are not allowed to leave the country without a man's permission (husband, father, brother etc.), a woman's witness testimony only counts half as that of a man in front of courts (making accusations of rape or domestic violence difficult) and it is written in the laws that women are legally obliged to abide their men. This structure profoundly

discriminates women and evidently leaves them as second-class citizens (Kar, 2007).

In 2019, women were denied access to over 250 university courses in Tehran alone, it is estimated that over 20 women in Tehran alone commit suicide every day and more than sixty thousand women within the last decade have been sex-trafficked through the Pakistani border (Akbarzadeh et. al, 2019). The laws of the Iranian state systematically disadvantage women in their pursuits to be economically independent, educated and secured outside of the authority of men. As Moghissi (2008) elaborates, this phenomenon can be observed throughout the countries of the Middle East since the rapid economic growth in the 1960s did not result in women gaining more fundamental rights, as it did with the Global North during the industrialization. Even though some Iranian mullah's vouge for reform of the Iranian constitution, highlighting that Islam must progress with time, if not it has failed its mission, the Iranian political elite has only tightened its strict rules for the women in the country (Ghajarieh & Salami, 2016). These structural disadvantages leave many women with no other choice than to be dependent on men or do some kind of illegal and not secure work. Particularly and as mentioned above, in high-ranking security systems, women are considered skilled enough to hold powerful and responsible positions. One can question if the security and intelligence realm of Iran sees the swallow contradictory to the pillars of the Iranian state at first, but does ultimately reinforce the image which the Iranian regime has of women, including the heavy objectification of their bodies (Moghissi, 2008).

What is known until now about female agents being used as swallows has not been thematized within the intelligence academia or within the gender critical academic sphere. Even though there are in-depth analyses within the academic sphere about the gender-discriminatory nature of the system of the Iranian state as well as analyses about Iran's intelligence apparatus, there has

not been a cohesive study about women within Iran's intelligence apparatus, their roles and why the phenomenon of the swallows has been slowly but increasingly become mouth-to mouth propaganda within the Iranian society, yet without any critical reflection. A gendered analysis of any security apparatus is of great significance since women are marginalized within the area of security and intelligence (Sharoni et. al, 2021). In addition, since there exists a level of saturation concerning the research about intelligence institutions in the Global North, thus a new perspective of any gendered dimension of a security apparatus outside of the Global North makes a significant contribution to the existing research (Bean, 2018). Furthermore, the analysis of Iranian intelligence use of swallows will not only shed a scientific light on the issue, but it will also aim to break up half-truths, rumors and prejudices and address the issue with a gender-sensitive perspective.

To conclude, the use of swallows within Iran's intelligence agencies has not been conceptualized and discussed in the academic sphere yet (Kar, 2007; Moghissi, 2008; Golkar, 2012; Moniquet, 2022; Akbarzadeh et. al, 2019). There are some speculations and news articles about the phenomenon which will be analyzed during the analysis, yet the nexus between the Iranian intelligence system, the use of swallows and the gendered dimension that comes with it will be assessed in this study and considered by the author as a contribution to the intelligence literature. The critical approach for the analysis of swallows is rooted in the deeply patriarchal system in which the Iranian intelligence but also Farsi speaking media is rooted in, making the analysis from this perspective particularly interesting. As swallows have been used in other countries and periods in the past but mainly in countries of the Global North as the literature review has shown, a further analysis of the concept from the viewpoint of a Global South country with including Farsi-speaking sources will also aim to move away from the Western centrism of intelligence studies (Crenshaw, 1991). As the review has shown, female agents are part of the intelligence structure of

any country, yet it is the transparency and public knowledge about them which differs from country to country (Saktanber, 2019). As Shahan (2019) outlines, the role of female agents as swallows has been mainly addressed in spy movies within the 20th century, providing only a romanticized and gendered image of the phenomenon, leaving out the reality and actual seriousness of the work. Especially in the context of the Iranian security apparatus, women are not being considered as serious stakeholders, therefore being excluded from decision-making on a high but also low-level security field (Gajarieh & Salami, 2016). Henceforth, this review also had the aim of de-stigmatizing the function as a swallow by highlighting the segregated system of the Iranian state, leaving Iranian women with little space and no substantial legal protection to move inside (Kar, 2007).

The theory behind the study

This chapter will outline the objectives, research questions, hypotheses, and theoretical framework of this study.

Objectives

The overall objective of this study is to analyze the portrayal of the Iranian swallows in online news articles and to draw conclusions about the treatment of the issue through the Iranian security apparatus since there are no concise primary sources available. A second underlying objective is concerned with the gendered language within the news articles, analyzing how the news articles accentuate the gendered dimension with reference to the swallows. Therefore, the most reliable secondary sources on the topic are news articles from online news outlets that deal with the use of swallows through Iranian intelligence agencies in a timeframe from 2018 to 2023. Furthermore, the online news articles were collected through Open-Source-Intelligence-Research (OSINT) and were examined in Farsi and English to better understand the

background of honey-trapping incidents as well as their framing. There was a deliberate intention to not interview individuals connected to the Iranian intelligence apparatus for several reasons:

1. The Iranian intelligence apparatus scrutinizes especially individuals outside of Iran who conduct systematic research on their internal structures and methods (Amnesty International, 2023). If one is not part or has no specific connection to individuals inside the apparatus one immediately becomes a potential target for these institutions. The structure of the Iranian intelligence agency remains mostly secret, hence posing difficulties to interact with individuals inside of it.

2. The potential swallows that are or were used for honey-trapping targets either remain incognito or view an interview as too dangerous. For instance, Faezeh Rafsanjani the daughter of former Iranian president Rafsanjani who is not a swallow but could have been a potential interviewee has been put under arrest for her critical statements about the Iranian regimes' harsh methods against protestors on the streets in Iran in October 2022 (Amnesty International, 2023). With consideration of the current increase in arrests and executions of opposing voices, even an anonymous interview would pose too great of a risk for the interviewees that would have participated in this study.

In addition, an analysis of primary sources is not possible since there are no official statements of Iran's security and intelligence institutions on the topic. However, there are several news articles that reference intelligence documents from Turkish, German, and US-American intelligence agencies that mention the use of Iranian swallows for honeytraps. Furthermore, some news articles contain interviews with former members of Iran's intelligence apparatus which will further shed light on the topic of this study. Therefore, the analysis of online news articles from credible Iranian and English news outlets will open the

possibility to analyze the case of swallows to achieve both objectives and to get a primary insight into the narrative about this topic, which is usually left in a secret space. Due to the above stated reasons, the study will be conducted from secondary source newspaper articles to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Iranian intelligence agencies use swallows for honey trapping targets?

2. To what extent does the reporting of Iranian swallows used for honey-trapping targets in online media contain a gendered dimension?

As this is one of the first studies conducted on the topic it closes two important research gaps as previously discussed in the literature review. First the actual systematic analysis of available secondary source data about the phenomenon and second the placement of the phenomenon into the gendered context to be able to view the analysis with the complex nuances it brings with. Two hypotheses emerge from the formulated research question which can be rejected through the results of the analysis yet facilitate now putting the issue into its right context.

1. The swallows are exploited through Iranian intelligence agencies to silence the voices of targets, yet the swallows themselves are held secret and do not possess any agency in the framing of the issue at hand.

2. The phenomenon of swallows used by Iranian intelligence agencies for honey-trapping targets highlights gender-discrimination that is perpetuated through the Iranian state and further reinforced through the presentation of the swallows in the online media articles.

Theoretical framework

This chapter will outline the theoretical framework of this study.

The theory behind the gendered dimensions of intelligence agencies

The theoretical ground for the execution of the analysis is based on the theory of queer intelligence developed by Manjikian (2020) in her book *Gender, Sexuality, and Intelligence*. The core of the theory highlights how intelligence as a state institution should be analyzed by critical theories that consider aspects such as gender and sexuality to offer a more nuanced analysis of intelligence institutions instead of seeing them as closed units (Manjikian, 2020). Therefore, the theory analyzes intelligence agencies which operate outside of the official state-image, a dimension which has been not acknowledged by intelligence scholars of realism and liberalism (Manjikian, 2020, p. 69). Instead of seeing intelligence activities as a given factor for the survival of the state, Manjikian (2020) elaborates that intelligence co-exists in a different space next to regular state activities. Therefore, queer intelligence entails the notion that *the secrecy* of intelligence agencies does indeed make them queer in comparison to official state institutions. The former operates in a hidden space, usually carrying out activities that contradict with the official presentation of the state, thus being considered queer. Queer intelligence theory aims to break out of the binary dichotomy of realism with which most of intelligence scholars analyze the topic (Manjikian, 2020, p. 34). It offers a holistic understanding on intelligence agencies, their structure, and their methods, instead of further reinforcing the dominant discourse of realism with regards to "the survival of the state" (Andrew, 2010).

For instance, the current academic consensus on the topic of female spies is described in a gender binary. There are obvious feminine/masculine traits connected to the definition of being a spy. As for the definition of a spy that

conducts honeytraps, the spy academy of the KGB that created swallows (female) and crows (male) is the closest to breaking through the gendered dimension of the honeytrap spy role binary (Wege, 2019). By presenting cases where women and men are used for the art of seduction of enemies, the female trait of seduction and lustfulness breaks through the aspect that this is something solely feminine and executed by women since the crows were executing the same mission (Manjikian, 2020). Even though most cases related to the seduction of opposition figures are documented to be women, it is significant to comprehend that the gender binary connected to the art of honey-trapping is a social construction of the spy itself.

Manjikian (2020) elaborates that an analysis of intelligence agencies will benefit from a critical feminist perspective, since intelligence agencies worldwide are still predominantly male-dominated in their personnel, which in turn influences how intelligence agents are being framed and seen by their own members, politicians, and intelligence scholars. In addition, bringing in the aspect of sexuality facilitates taking out the stigma of the topic and rather analyze how the interplay between gender, sexuality and intelligence offers a more nuanced perspective on being a spy, instead of seeing the latter as a black box (Manjikian, 2020). Through this critical analysis, one can create a more complex and in-depth image of the spy itself. The critical perspective through which Manjikian (2020) analyzes the state will help to progress the scholarly literature within the intelligence field, showing that themes such as gender and sexuality are part of every layer of the state, even the secret dimensions such as intelligence activities. One can assume that the latter is even more affected by queer intelligence theory especially due to its secret nature. This queer dimension will influence the psychology and actions of those operating in it, as everyone knows that their actions are by no means regular actions of state-officials. To be able to understand the actions of the spy, one therefore must consider this queer dimension and recognize the gendered language and

perspective through which most of the scholarly literature have analyzed intelligence actions (Manjikian, 2020). Through an extensive analysis of declassified intelligence files from various intelligence agencies within the Global North, the state and thus the intelligence agents working for the state are connotated to a gendered queer dimension. This dimension entails the fact that the state has an official narrative and image through which it presents itself to the world.

There is in fact an inside/outside dynamic when it comes to the state actions and the actions of the spy. Therefore, being a spy in the secret dimension of the state adds another layer that goes beyond the binary image of the state. An intelligence agent that must execute their job within the sphere of secrecy, hidden from public opinion and societal pressure might do exactly what the state tries not to present to the outside. The state has therefore a hidden and indeed "queer" dimension (Manjikian, 2020, p. 85). The spy, in Manjikian's (2020) theory is therefore being "closeted" (p. 54) and hidden from the official image and actions of the state. Recognizing that the agent moves in a secret and thus queer dimension particularly within current state systems immediately leverages the perspectives in which spies can be perceived. In contrast to diplomats, politicians and other important state actions, spies do not have to follow the etiquette of the state narrative. Even though they are also working for the state, they do not need to participate in the creation of an official and professional state image, but rather must stay in secrecy to execute hidden operations on behalf of another "unofficial" state narrative (Manjikian, 2020, p. 87).

The theory of queer intelligence will serve as the basis for the analysis of the news articles. Queer intelligence theory further recognizes the Western centrism within the intelligence scholarly field imbalance and provides a shift away towards different cultures and structures which have been neglected by

intelligence scholars of the Global North (Manjikian, 2020). The theory offers insights on how intelligence agencies outside of the Global North operate and is therefore strong in its scientific validity and generalization. As this study aims to provide a more nuanced analysis on the Iranian intelligence agencies and the framing of swallows, a theory that considers variables outside of the gender-binary and Western-centrism, will enhance the robustness of the research.

The intelligence agent and the honeytrap

First, the term intelligence agent will be defined, then a specific definition will be given for the specific role of the swallow. For this analysis the term intelligence agent will be defined as a queer spy that is going against the official narrative of the state. They will be executing actions and present themselves in a specific way which 1. Directly contradicts the representation of the state yet the state intentionally wants them to follow specific hidden actions or they 2. Act as a lone wolf in the name of the state without leaders directly knowing (Shahan, 2019).

The intelligence agent is at first not connected to a gendered attribution since the agent by themselves must be able to take on a variety of roles and be able to adapt to any type of situation. Therefore, by themselves, the intelligence agent is defined as a person that acts as a hidden member of the state apparatus. The intelligence agent intentionally goes against the official state image to conduct operations that will be beneficial for the states position of power apart from official diplomatic and military actions. The practice of espionage is so common for states, diplomacy is always taken with a grain of salt, with states silently acknowledging each other's queer intelligence dimension (Manjikian, 2020, p. 56). In this way, states construct a reality where even though one might trust each other officially, there is always a queer dimension of states ultimately acting by themselves. This acknowledgement to realist theories has been given

by the theory of queer intelligence. However, for the analysis, no prejudicial gendered attributions will be given to the definition intelligence agent by itself. Nevertheless, since the analysis will specifically analyze the role of intelligence agents that do not only conduct espionage but use the espionage known as honeytrap, the *gendered dimension* that comes with it will be assessed prior to the analysis.

For the analysis in this thesis, the definition of the term honey-trapping will entail a female agent, also labeled hereby as *the swallow*, that pursuits a *romantic and/or sexual relation with a target* that poses a threat to the intelligence agency. Hereby, honey-trapping is a method that can be executed through a variation of practical ways, hence there is not a singular way through which the honeytrap defines itself. Since the Iranian intelligence agencies' structure proves that the agency cannot act independently from the Supreme Leader and Velayat, this study assesses that the target must pose a threat to the state leadership itself through questioning its legitimacy (Wege, 2019). Even though in democracies there is an element of separating the actions of the political leadership with that of the intelligence community, in authoritarian systems the intelligence community stands under direct command of the political elite., thus there is no possibility for deviating from the political leaderships demand (Andrew, 2010). A clear definition of a honey-trap for this study is significant since the term has been used for other purposes within the intelligence community. For instance, Iranian counterintelligence did create around 16 online fake websites in 2021 that promised high-paid jobs for Israeli security institutions (Skynews, 2020). These websites targeted Hezbollah members in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, to see how loyal they would be to the Iranian state. This mission was also labelled under *honey-trap* since it lured Hezbollah members into an online trap but does not include HUMINT and the use of a swallow. Therefore, honey-trapping for this study must contain a physical, human, and female swallow. The construction of the queer dimension

within the Iranian state regarding espionage and specifically honey-trapping does exist, but it follows a different pattern.

The intelligence agent that does conduct the honey-trap for the Iranian intelligence agency, will further be defined for this study as a "wallow, assuming that Iranian intelligence agencies will solely use women for this job. First, the swallow will be defined as an intelligence agent that becomes queer in a sense that they will use honey- trapping as a method to 1. Obtain information from the target and/or 2. Influence the decision making of the target and/or 3. Lure the target to a specific location (Manjikian, 2020, p. 157). The queerness of the swallow the context of Iran is constructed since the Iran officially considers itself an Islamic republic. As Banerjea (2015) elaborates, the Iranian state follows the rules of Sharia Law. Within the Iranian regime's interpretation of Sharia Law, it is forbidden to use women for acts of romantic seduction. The official state narrative aims to portray women as obedient, therefore the mere existence of the concept of an Iranian swallow conducting honey-trapping can be seen as a queer and gendered dimension of Iranian intelligence agencies. As mentioned above, the method of honey-trapping will be defined as a female intelligence agent that creates a romantic bond with the target. The emphasis lays on the term *romantic* since the art of honey trapping exceeds friendships and friendly connections as it prerequisites an emotional connection. Physical seduction can but does not necessarily fall into the definition of honey-trapping. Even though it can be a part of the tactic, it is not necessary for the swallow to have had any physical encounter with the target. In addition, the female intelligence agent conducting the method will be called a swallow, since her main goal as an intelligence agent is to honey-trap the target while being in duty for the state. The word swallow is therefore inevitably connected with the method of honey-trapping for this study.

In the previous paragraph, it is stated that physical seduction does not necessarily fall into the definition of honey-trapping. This is since within the last decade, Iranian intelligence agencies have perfectionated the use of the cyberspace to directly target their victims through, for instance, communication applications such as WhatsApp or Telegram (Sadjadpour & Anderson, 2018). In this way it is possible to lure target into a honeytrap since the digital sphere provides enough space for an agent to form an emotional bond with the target. The physical aspect is important, yet it proves not to be crucial. Therefore, honey-trapping not only entails the creation of a romantic emotional bond with the target but can entail a non-physical cyber dimension. Lastly, there is an intentional move to use the term swallow, thus legitimizing the existence of the former through the language used, with the goal to test the hypotheses and research question against the term itself. However, one must critically reflect at the end of the analysis, how much worth the term holds after the analysis of the cases.

The intelligence agency and the target

In the context of Iranian intelligence agencies, the term Iranian intelligence agencies can entail either the MOIS or the IRGC intelligence branch since both branches present the main agencies for HUMINT missions (Serscikov, 2023). However, there is still no scholarly or media consensus on which agency does execute most of the honey-trapping (Serscikov, 2023). Therefore, for the analysis, the term intelligence agency will include either one or both agencies. Due to the limited space and the hierarchical structure of the Iranian security system, a differentiation with regards to the use of swallows is of secondary importance. The method of honey-trapping entails for both agencies silencing critical and opposing voices.

In the same context, the term *target* will be defined as someone the intelligence agencies view as a threat to the ideological grounds on which the state is built upon. Therefore, this definition does not conclude that the target is a threat to the security of the state as in other traditional definitions yet presumes that the target poses a threat to the *ideological pillars* on which the state has been built. In the context of Iran, the state was built on the political elites' interpretation of Political Islam, hence the Iranian states puts emphasis that the rules laid out in their interpretation of Sharia Law must be followed and accepted without critical voices (Haghighat, 2021). The crucial point here is that the Iranian political elite can classify any type of criticism against the state as blasphemy to Shia Islam, therefore voicing criticism can have grave consequences for the individual. In addition, these theocratic pillars not only place public institutions under control of the Supreme Leader, yet they are also used as a means by the political elite to justify its actions under the eyes of the civil society and media landscape (Haghighat, 2021; Golkar, 2012; Kar, 2007; Ebadi, 2009).

To be able to reject claims of acting corruptly or against the will of the people, the strong Islamic ideology is used to justify any state action without the society knowing the full picture, or as Manjikian (2020) defines it, as the "queerness behind the curtains" (p. 45). In this context, the targets can *be framed* as a threat to the state's security, yet it entails a threat to the theocratic pillars on which the Iranian state has been built. This framing can be based on a variety of actions that the target can do. It can be the obvious voicing of criticism on the legitimacy of the Iranian regime, but it can also be through using the political system for conducting corruption, hence also posing a threat to the Iranian regime since they do not want to show that official politicians do corruption. A threat to the Iranian regime is therefore not dichotomous and is much dependent on an individual's role in relation to the former (Manjikian, 2020). Therefore, a target will be defined as an individual that is perceived by high-ranking

members of the intelligence community and the political leadership of Iran as a threat to their theocratic pillars. This facilitates the extermination of opposition figures that question the Iranian states ideology in total, not solely its state actions and who through their actions are seen as a threat since they de-legitimize the religious legitimacy of the regime. The method of honey-trapping through swallows is used on these targets to silence their opposing voices. The following data collection and analysis of the data aim to shed light on both hypotheses.

Methodology

Data Collection and Operationalization of the Main Codes

This chapter will outline the operationalization process of the sources and the creation of main codes for the analysis.

To emphasize again, the overall objective of this study is to assess how the Iranian intelligence agencies utilize swallows for honey-trapping opposing individuals through the analysis of online news articles. A second additional objective includes an analysis of these news articles from a critical gendered perspective to highlight how the news articles perpetuate certain stereotypes of the swallows.

For the collection of the data, online newspaper articles in the languages Farsi and English were used. The author first considered other languages as well such as German, yet after a preliminary search, it was clear that no additional information was offered through other languages and that the main information from English and Farsi articles was exhaustive. In addition, the author chose to focus on online news articles since they offer a low cost yet high-quality method for data collection as the information needed for the analysis is available in the public outlets. In addition, the focus on online news articles offered a non-

invasive yet highly transparent method of collection, without the need of physical interviews with the collection process and replication of easily being replicable through other social scientists (Amundsen, 2021). The choice to use articles in Farsi has been not a common practice within the intelligence scholarly sphere making the analysis of them a significant contribution to the existing research (Bean, 2018). Several former intelligence agency members have been interviewed; some intelligence documents presented as well as some of the common mouth-to mouth propaganda from within the political elite has been laid out within the news articles. Therefore, their analysis will not only be the sole link to have a better image on how the Iranian intelligence agencies use swallows for honey-trapping targets, ye tit will also directly present the variations on the framing of the issue.

The timeframe for the online news articles and period for analysis are from 2018 until 2023 due to the increase of news articles mentioning and speculating about the term swallows in the context of Iran. Through the application Dork Search targeted research was conducted for newspaper articles in English and Farsi. To clarify, Dork Search like Google is a software extension that facilitates Open-Source-Intelligence-Research (OSINT) through typing specific keywords in the search bar. In contrast to other search engines, Dork Search presents only the results that include the keywords that one had previously typed into the search bar. In this way, the online research for specific articles regarding swallows and honey-trapping became more systematic and enhanced in focus (Anderson & Sadjadpour, 2018). For the English news articles, Dork Search was used with specific keywords. The combination of the keywords that resulted in finding relevant newspapers can be found in table 1 below.

For the newspaper articles in Farsi, Dork Search was used again to gather specific newspaper articles with the keywords which can be seen in the tables

below. There are more keywords used in Farsi since there were more articles available in Farsi with the specific information needed than in English. As the keywords showed a variety of overlapping results, the table 2 contains the most important ones for the data collection. A total of 24 articles were collected, analyzed, and coded.

Keyword	Language	Number of Articles Found
"swallow" + "Iran"	English	3
"female intelligence agent" + "Iran"	English	2
"honeytrap" + "Iran"	English	2

Table 1: Keywords used in English.

Keyword	Language	Translation to English	Number of Articles Found
"پرستو" + "ایران"	Farsi	"swallow" + "Iran"	6
"زنان نهادهای امنیتی"+ "ایران"	Farsi	"female intelligence agent" + "Iran"	3
"جاسوسی تله عسل" +"ایران"	Farsi	"honeytrap" + "Iran"	2
"حبیب چعب"" + "روح الله زم" + "پرستو"	Farsi	"swallow" + "Ruhollah Zam" + "Habib Chaab"	3
"مخالفت"+ "پرستونماها"	Farsi	"those named swallows" + "opposition"	3

Table 2: Keywords used in Farsi.

Another important aspect encountered once the articles were gathered is that they represent different fractions of opinions, ranging from being close to the Iranian regimes narrative to being opposing news outlets. As Bean (2018) has previously elaborated, the dialectics of power that come with the publication of news articles is important to consider since they again perpetuate power. Since especially many Farsi news articles are either strongly pro the narrative of the Iranian regime or strongly against it, a further classification and division of each outlet can be found in table 3 of the appendix below. As Rai (1984) has elaborated, the ideology carried through the news articles shapes the discourse around the phenomenon. Therefore, a classification of the ideology that carries it can be determined and set up by the author. Here, three main categories further help to classify the closeness of the outlets to the Iranian regime, enhancing scientific credibility through proving that do not stem from a neutral standpoint. In sum, all news articles gathered are from official online news outlets that operate either inside Iran (N=9) or from another country (N=13).

The coding of the articles was conducted through the software MaxQDA where the articles were systematically read, analyzed, and ordered. For this study, a qualitative content analysis (QCA) of the newspapers will be conducted where specific phrases will be analyzed to infer meaning and context about the topic. In addition, the QCA will be executed as a latent content analysis. This means that the phrases analyzed contain a deeper meaning in terms of context, power relations and interpretation. Here, the meaning behind the phrases is co-created next to the phrases themselves instead of taking them literally. This type of method complements the ontological premises this study since latent QCA is often used when no preexisting research has been conducted about a specific topic (Christensen, 2018). This study will be the first one to analyze the phenomenon of swallows used for honey trapping targets in the context of Iran, thus it is crucial to analyze the phrases in-depth, look for similarities and create a deeper meaning based on the above presented theoretical framework.

Therefore, the gendered dimension deduced from the theory of queer intelligence will be used to co-create analysis and meaning of the phrases simultaneously.

As outlined by Manjikian (2020) the step of initial coding begins after the collection of the data at hand. This includes reading through the data firsthand and outlining the information related to the motivation of the swallows, the consequences of honey-trapping and the characteristics of the target. In total, four cases were identified that had overlapping characteristics, story and method related to the use of swallows for honey trapping targets. The results can be viewed in the table below:

Case	Number of related articles	Languages
Kidnapping of Journalist Ruhollah Zam	6	English, Farsi
Kidnapping of Activist Habib Chaab	7	English, Farsi
Murder of swallow Mitra Ostad by former major of Tehran Mohammad Najafi	9	Farsi
Killing/ Suicide of Gholamreza Mansouri	2	English

Table 3: Cases with related articles.

The analysis will examine the phrases accordingly to the system of the codes. After the initial round of reading and note-taking, two main categories were identified that refer to the research questions 1 and 2. These categories

simply distinguish the analysis from relevant paragraphs for Question and Hypothesis 1 and Question and Hypothesis 2. They will be called Category 1 and Category 2. Then specific paragraphs that were highlighted either contain information to either Question 1 or Question 2. Then, a set of preliminary *main codes* was developed with which the specific phrases were categorized and identified with. The main codes are put into two separate categories: The first category contains the first 6 main codes which analyze the paragraphs concerned with how the Iranian intelligence agencies use female agents as swallows for honey-trapping. The main codes developed are categorized under *Closetedness, Recruitment, Internal Targets, External Targets, Threat,* and *Deception.* For each main code a set of sentences were defined which would make a paragraph classify for a specific main code. For instance, the main code *Recruitment* includes sentences such as "The swallow was trained by the security institution and intentionally put into place" and "yet there is no information on which institution actively approaches the swallow". The combination of these sentences with regards to the latent meaning behind the literal word facilitated the creation of a coding pattern with which the articles were analyzed (Amundsen, 2021).

The second category with three main codes delves into the gendered dimension of the use of swallows with a further emphasis put to the framework proposed by Manjikian (2020). The three main codes include *Objectification, Use of Force* and *Ideological Assumptions* found in paragraphs of the news articles. For instance, for the main code *Ideological Assumptions* sentences such as "A theocratic state would never use swallows" and "the mere consideration of the swallows being recruited through intelligence agencies contradicts the pillars of the foundation of the state" are classified under a specific ideological ground which the author aims to present in relation to the topic. A complete overview of the definition of the main codes can be found in the tables 1 and 2 of the appendix.

```
                    ┌─────────────┐
                    │ Preliminary │
                    │   Reading   │
                    └──────┬──────┘
                           │
                    ┌──────┴──────┐
                    │ First round │
                    │ of analysis │
┌──────────┐        │ for research│
│ Line of  │        │ questions   │
│ Process  │        │   1 & 2     │
└──────────┘        └──────┬──────┘
              ┌────────────┴────────────┐
       ┌──────┴───────┐          ┌──────┴───────┐
       │   Marking    │          │   Marking    │
       │   specific   │          │   specific   │
       │  paragraphs  │          │  paragraphs  │
       │  related to  │          │  related to  │
       │  question 1  │          │  question 2  │
       └──────┬───────┘          └──────┬───────┘
       ┌──────┴───────┐          ┌──────┴───────┐
       │ Creation of  │          │ Creation of  │
       │  six main    │          │ three main   │
       │ codes for the│          │ codes for the│
       │   analysis   │          │   analysis   │
       └──────┬───────┘          └──────┬───────┘
              └────────────┬────────────┘
                    ┌──────┴──────┐
                    │  Analyzing  │
                    │ paragraphs  │
                    │  based on   │
                    │    codes    │
                    └─────────────┘
```
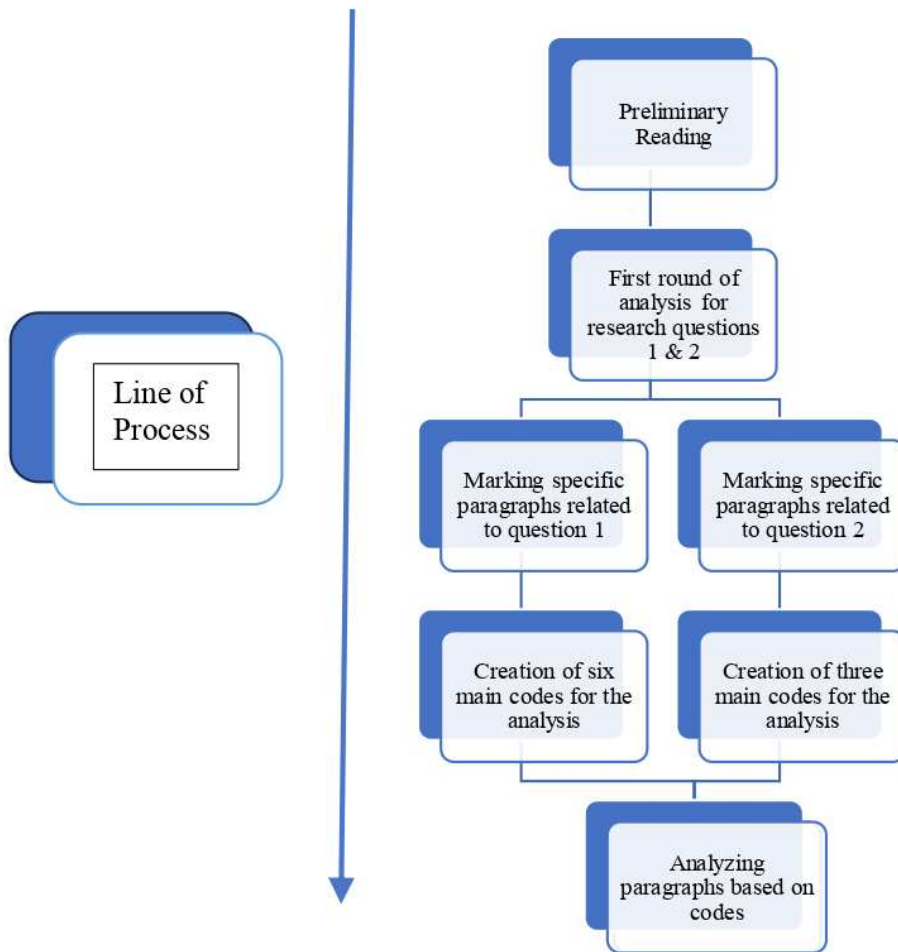
Table 4: Visual representation of the coding process.

It is important to mention that the second part of the analysis cannot be seen in isolation to the first research question, since the issue of Iranian intelligence agencies using swallows is an inherently gendered issue. However, the analysis for the research questions built up on each other with question 2 complementing the findings of question 1. The aim is to create a holistic yet critical analysis on the topic at hand.

Limitations and Biases

As each study presents limitations and biases, this research is also not free from it (Peshkin, 1988). As for the limitations of this study, it is evident that no primary sources were available for a cohesive analysis on the topic of swallows and honey-trapping in the Iranian context. Primary sources such as official statements by Iran's security agencies, declassified intelligence documents from the Iranian intelligence agencies or the possibility to conduct interviews with former Iranian female agents would have increased the credibility of the study (Crenshaw, 1991). As news articles provide extensive information for the creation of an overview on the topic, the loaded language and mix between true facts and potential rumors, one must use them with a sense of caution (Burowksi, 2022). In contrast to primary sources, news articles on the issue of swallows in the Iranian context can contain false information either deliberately or unintentionally. This ties in with the issue that there is only restricted access to the information available on the topic in general. The Iranian intelligence agencies seldomly declassify information or publishes public statements, making their level of secrecy around any operation and incident difficult to analyze (Akbarzadeh et. al, 2019). Even though one must always keep a critical eye on any information found, in the case of the topic of this study, one must be even more aware of the existing limitations when it comes to the data. In addition, this study is limited to sources in the languages English and Farsi. However, there is potentially more information available also in the languages of Russian, Hebrew Arabic (Hounam, 2004). These languages are local to the region and contain many news outlets as well, yet due to language limitations, only Farsi and English sources have been used. A last limitation is the generalizability of the findings of this study, a limitation that usually is connected to qualitative research methods (Christensen, 2018). Even though the findings are robust in their collection, analysis and have been systematically structured, the specificality of the studied topic creates a difficulty for the generalization of the findings. In sum, the limitations of the study mainly

concern the data collection and available sources since most of the missions of the Iranian intelligence agencies occur still in secrecy.

Similarly, biases can occur in every step of the research. One can have biases within the planning, data collection, analysis and/or the discussion part of the research (Peshkin, 1988. Biases are not dichotomous, and one cannot simply answer with "yes this is a bias or no this is not a bias" (Manjikian, 2020, p. 145). The issue with biases is much more nuanced, making their identification and prevention significant for the scientific credibility of the study. For this research, the main identified bias has been the selection bias when it came to the collection of the news articles. Since very specific keywords have been used to select articles, it can lead to the fallacy that only articles were collected to support the hypothesis without the consideration of other factors and sources (Scott, 1986). Due to the nature of this study, this bias cannot be fully reduced since there was an intentional part from the author to choose specific articles, however the above-mentioned software Dorksearch facilitated a more clear and concise selection of news articles while being able to have an overview of all related articles on the topic at hand. Secondly, biases during the analysis cannot be fully reduced since this study obliged to choose specific paragraphs and create new variables based on the theoretical framework (Manjikian, 2020). The choice of the paragraphs and framing of the variables, even though executed through a scientific systematic scheme, still include a level of subjectivity from the author in the consideration of what makes a paragraph relevant or not. Therefore, the here mentioned biases are being acknowledged prior to the analysis of the results.

Analysis – Finding the hidden swallows.

Chapter 1: Recruitment, Targets and Deception.

This chapter will analyze the paragraphs obtained through the systematic coding.

As Hieber (2005) emphasizes, it is usual for news media outlets to sensationalize the discourse around female agents. As highlighted in the literature review particularly after the prominent case of Mata Hari, the phenomenon of female agents is mainly connotated to "lust, sex and deception" (Hieber, 2005, p. 5). The honey-trapping method by swallows in the Iranian context allows one to analyze the complexity of the Iranian security apparatus, thus moving away from black or white explanations and rather create a nuanced overview of the many complexities of the topic. Therefore, the first part of the analysis will focus on the analysis of the first six main codes, followed by the second chapter which will focus on the analysis of the second three main codes.

Case	Definition
Ruhollah Zam + Shirin Najafi (or Soudabeh Khorsand)	Ruhollah Zam was based in France and the Co-founder of the news outlet Amad News through which he published articles which were very critical of the Iranian state. After a stranger woman named Shirin Najafi became a main part of the team in 2018, even though Zam's other team members did not trust her, she promised him to get his website turned to a Tv show since she had contacts to an Iraqi based cleric who promised to sponsor the creation of the Amad-News TV-show. Ruhollah Zam traveled to Iraq in 2019 and got kidnapped at the Iraqi Airport by Iranian intelligence agents. He was forced into a trial and executed by hanging in January 2020 in Iran. Shirin Najafi also known under the name Soudabeh Khorsand remained a Co-Admin of Amad News until she disappeared a month

	before Zam's execution. It is unclear where she is residing now or if she is still alive.
Mohammad Najafi+ Mitra Ostad	Mitra Ostad was the wife of the former mayor of Tehran Mohammad Ali Najafi, aged 67. After allegedly loud fights between the couple, Najafi shot his 36-year-old wife with a pistol in 2019 leading to her death. Mitra Ostad was labelled a swallow after her death by various media outlets, without much actual private information about her getting published. Najafi was convicted of second-degree murder in 2020 but released out of jail in 2023 after Mitra Ostads family forgave him.
Habib Chaab + Sabreen Shirin	Habib Chaab was one of the co-founders of an activist group for the Arab Minority in the South of Iran which is classified as a terrorist organization by the Iranian state. He was supposed to meet Sabreen Saeidi, also a member of the same group, in Istanbul, Turkey for a romantic meeting. Sabreen Saeidi was part of the opposition group for three years at that point, she had lived in the UK and had previously moved back to Iran. After Chaab arrived at the airport, he was kidnapped by an Iranian mafia group, drugged, and transported back to Iran. There he was forced to stand trial and executed in 2023.
Gholamreza Mansouri + Farnaz Eftehkari	Gholamreza Mansouri is a former Iranian member of parliament who fled to Romania in 2020 after having received half a million dollars in bribes. Mansouri was allegedly lured specifically into Romania by a swallow named Farnaz Eftehkari. Mansouri died by alleged suicide

	in June 2020 after jumping out of a hotel window with some journalists speculating that he was murdered. The case caused outrage among journalists worldwide since Mansouri was responsible for the killing of many innocent political prisoners during the mass executions in 1988 and was supposed to be held accountable at the international human rights court (Amnesty International, 2023). Farnaz Eftehkari was a university student in Paris before the incident occurred, her current whereabouts and actual identity are unknown.

Table 5: A brief overview of each of the four cases.

Mitra Ostad, Shirin Najafi, Sabreen Saeidi and Farnaz Eftehkari. These four names were mentioned frequently throughout the analysis of the 24 articles in relation with the word swallow. Table 5 above briefly presents the context of each of the four cases. As Manjikian (2020) analyzed in the chapter "The secrecy of being a spy", the "Closetedness" (p. 150) indicates the secrecy surrounding the personal lives of a spy, hence the latter is still "in the closet" (p. 151). For this analysis, the main code *Closetedness* intentionally took the wording of Manjikian (2020) to further highlight the importance of analyzing the intelligence agent with a level of critical reflection and not see her as a black box. The available information about the personal lives of these four swallows is a narrow space to step into with little information have been found throughout the analysis. However, the main code *Closetedness* gathered eleven paragraphs related to any type of personal information mentioned in the articles. The existence of this main code is significant and the explanation twofold. First, the security and political context of Iran as mentioned above is inherently disadvantaging women in all aspects of public and private spheres (Afary, 2010). The existence of not only female agents but female agents used for honey-trapping is assumed to be held secret as much as possible, hence no

official statements and written documents are available on the matter (Serscikov, 2023). Therefore, any personal information surrounding the women is out of interest to piece the puzzle pieces together for answering the question who the women behind the phenomenon swallow are.

Closetedness

The Closetedness of the women behind the swallow is apparent when analyzing the articles. From twenty-four articles a total of seven paragraphs from six articles briefly mentioned the background of the women. No information could be obtained around the personal motivation that could have explained their path to becoming a swallow. From the case of Farnaz Eftehkari, who is known for luring Gholamreza Mansouri to Romania after month-long romantic chats in the cybersphere, the only credible information obtained was that her status on an official Erasmus student page stated that she was a resident in Paris and a graduate of the University of Tehran (NCRI, 2022). A few days after the alleged suicide of Mansouri, Farnaz's name on the page was changed from Farnaz to Sahar. There is no further information on her background or on her actual role in the death of Mansouri. As for Shirin Najafi Zadeh, a total of one paragraph contained information regarding her personal life stating that she was seeking asylum in Turkey since 2013 and that she is also known by the name Soodabeh Khorsand (Journalism is not a crime, 2021). It is speculated that Shirin Najafi Zadeh is now held in a secret prison of the IRGC unit in Iran. Similarly, with the case of Mitra Ostad, it is only known that her family lives in Iran and that she has an older brother (Ensaf-news, 2022).

The most obtained information with a total of five paragraphs in three articles is concerned with Sabreen Saeidi, the swallow that allegedly lured Habib Chaab to Turkey with the help of an Iranian mafia lead by a man named Ali Chargi (BBC Persian, 2022). Sabreen Saeidi herself was part of the Arab

minority in Iran and several of her family members were killed by the Iranian regime between 1983 and 1988 (Alef News, 2023). She migrated to London, England where she studied at London School of Economics before going back to Iran around 2014 to marry one of her cousins. Around that time, she joined the activist group for the Arab minority in the South of Iran which Chaab was one of the co-founders of. Both were having close contact according to other members (Skynews, 2021). There is no further information about the women's motivations, aspirations, and reasons why specifically their names are being connected to that of a swallow. No personal interviews with the women are recorded. In addition, none of the seven paragraphs for *Closetedness* critically assess the lack of information on the personal background of the swallows (Manjikian, 2020).

Recruitment

As stated above, the creation of main codes for the scientific analysis of the news media articles do overlap each other in certain points and should not been seen in isolation of each other. Therefore, the main code *Recruitment* does show elements of *Closetedness* whilst analyzing the articles yet includes additional information on the potential recruitment process of the swallows. A total of 13 paragraphs from ten different news articles contained relevant information to how the swallows might get recruited. Manjikian's (2020) elaborated element of "secrecy surrounding the spy" (p. 189) is enhanced when analyzing the data since one can observe that there is no official statement mentioned to who recruits the swallow or how they are being recruited.

As a general introduction two articles quoting former minister of education Ali Younesi state that "the women might have spiritual, economic, social and emotional needs" (VOA Farsi, 2019), therefore they might engage in the activity as a swallow. Three articles mention that the IRGC hires the women

directly through their own network, leaving the competing MOIS out. The main two recruitment methods speculated in the news articles are the 1. Arbitrary and non-intentional recruitment and the 2. Targeted intentional recruitment (VOA Farsi, 2019; Rouydad24, 2023; Radio Farda, 2022; Al-Arabiya, 2020). The first instance describes the recruitment of the women as swallows while they are already in touch with the target. This first connection has already been established without the interference of the intelligence agency. The woman might be in touch with the target for personal reasons. This is speculated for the cases of Shirin Najafi Zadeh and Mitra Ostad as six articles state both women's names in relation with the first recruitment method. The second recruitment method includes a prior screening and preparation of the swallow through the intelligence agency with the goal to contact the target and obtain information. Here, the woman is already part of the intelligence agency and contacts the target with the intention to infiltrate him. The second method is brought in connection with the names of Farnaz Eftehkari and Sabreen Saeidi. Two articles further mention that the swallows could have been contacted through the internet without ever having seen another intelligence agent in person (Baratinha, 2023). However, this theory does not stand in direct connection with any of the women's names in neither of the analyzed paragraphs. With regards to the queer dimension of intelligence agencies, four articles mention that even though no official statements exist on the recruitment of swallows, it is part of unwritten protocols of the intelligence communities worldwide and there is a need for "secret and hidden tools such as swallows even within the Iranian intelligence agencies" (Ensaf News, 2019).

The Threat and the Targets

This paragraph will conceptualize how the intelligence agencies see potential targets as a threat, hence why the method of swallows might be used on this specific set of targets. While analyzing a total of fifteen news articles, it

is evident that articulated threats are directly connected to the issue of the target being an *external or internal target*. A total of 9 paragraphs each for having information in elaborating the connection between a security threat and internal targets were identified. In addition,11 paragraphs mentioning a connection between external targets and security threat were examined.

Journalist and external target Ruhollah Zam posed a threat since his Telegram-channel Amad-News had over 1.4 million followers where he was posting information about upcoming demonstrations and ways to protest the Iranian regime (BBC Farsi, 2020). Similarly, one can observe this with the case of Habib Chaab, as he was the Co-Founder of a group outside of Iran with the aim to shed light on the structural issues of the Arab minority in the South of Iran (Skynews, 2021). Therefore, with external targets, the main threat that the security agencies appear to be identifying are the former gaining influence in the diaspora and among ethnic minorities for voicing their opposition towards the legitimacy of the existence of the Iranian regime. This includes men and women who have gained a certain level of popularity among the Iranian opposition groups and exert influence on the diaspora outside of Iran. The threat both individuals exerted is framed in the paragraphs as a bottom-up dynamic, where their increasing legitimacy among the Iranian diaspora and partially among Iranian inside Iran, made them dangerous in the eyes of the Iranian security apparatus.

However, with the internal targets, the classification as a threat appears to be top- to bottom. As the main code names it, the internal targets are part of the political elitist structure of the Iranian regimes system. With the cases of Mohammad Najafi and Gholamreza Mansouri, both were members of the parliament in Tehran (BBC Persian, 2023). They knew the Iranian political system from the inside and were connected to the main political and security actors. The reason why the paragraphs frame that the intelligence agencies see

these internal targets as threats is that in both cases a sense of de-legitimization of the Iranian regime due to the men's involvement in corruption was created. In the case of Mohammad Najafi, him killing his wife Mitra Ostad created criticism among members of the security apparatus since he quickly began to label her as a swallow. Two paragraphs elaborate that he was allegedly taking bribes and accused his dead wife in his trial that she wanted to publicize his crimes. A paragraph by Radio Farda's (2022) article about swallows emphasizes that the Iranian intelligence agencies quickly rejected this claim yet removed Mohammad Najafi's status as a politician and exerted a mass-hate campaign against him. Najafi can be considered a threat not through him being an opposing figure to the system, yet deviating in his actions from the ways the Iranian regime aims to hold their legitimacy high in front of the eyes of the Iranian society.

In the case of Gholamreza Mansouri, the former MP left for Romania after accepting a bribe of over half a million dollars. The intelligence agency used a swallow to lure him into Romania since "no other method would have been able to trick the mind of the desperate and lonely man" (Jerusalem Post, 2021). It is claimed that Mansouri was pressured into committing suicide afterwards through the swallow so that he will not be able to testify his crimes against humanity in front of the international court of human rights, where a coalition of journalists and families of victims of his mass-execution orders from 1988 were anticipating bringing him to justice (NCRI, 2022). In this case, the threat coming from Mansouri is similar in the element of corruption to that of Najafi, yet the swallow was also used to hinder him from being forced to testify his crimes against humanity which would have also led to a de-legitimization of the Iranian regime's ideology. In both cases, the internal/external dichotomy fits to the paragraphically framing of the news articles and with both main codes, the Iranian security agency appears to solely target individuals through swallows for honey-trapping.

Deception

In relation to the paragraph above, a variety of honey-trapping deception methods were listed in a total of nineteen paragraphs from thirteen articles. Methods of deception as elaborated by Manjikian (2020) are utilized by the spy to confuse the target and make them believe in a falsely created reality. This leads to the target becoming vulnerable with the potential to exploit the targets valuable information or manipulate their action (Manjikian, 2020). As the deception method of the swallows is known to be honey-trapping, the latter can vary in the execution, therefore this main code will analyze if and how in each of the cases, the deception was being utilized. In ten articles, it is specifically mentioned that the Iranian swallows consist of *beautiful and young women* whose role is to blind the target with their physical attributes (Alef News, 2023).

While chapter two below will further address the gender dimension of these statements, it is evident that part of the media narrative is to frame the swallow as someone that uses their looks for deceiving the opponent. A total of three articles mentions that the targets' vulnerability towards the deceptive methods of the swallows referencing that they are usually "male politicians in the second part of their life, missing substantial aspects of sexual attraction in their life's" (Donya-e-eqtesad, 2022), with one article specifically elaborating that the "structure of the male brain leaves them as vulnerable targets" (Sharvand, 2022). In nine of the analyzed nineteen paragraphs, the swallow is metaphorically described as "a hunter that is swirling around the heads of its prey", creating a specific power dynamic that puts the swallows into a power position in which they can exert their influence on the target (Radio Farda, 2018; Rouydad24, 2023). The repetition of this metaphorical description was found in six paragraphs of the seven articles in relation to Mitra Ostad, even though she was murdered by her husband Mohammad Najafi. Nevertheless, the seven

articles specifically mention her case while elaborating the deception she used on Najafi. On the other hand, in the cases of Sabreen Saeidi and Shirin Najafi, two paragraphs of two articles highlight the use of "darkroom directors" (Donya-e-eqtesad, 2022; Alef News, 2023). The latter refers to the high-level intelligence officers inside Iran's intelligence agencies who have the initial control over the mission as well as over the actions of the swallows. The description of "darkroom directors" is additionally being accompanied by one paragraph that highlights that those targets contacted through social media might believe they are chatting with the swallow but are exchanging messages with a full team of intelligence officers (Rouydad24, 2023).

Lastly, the deceptive methods described in the articles appear to have a clear line of distinguishment between the external and the internal targets. The external target's goal of the deception through the honey-trap was to lure the former to a specific place which led to their abduction as in the cases of Habib Chaab and Ruhollah Zam. In contrast, with the two internal targets Mohammad Najafi and Gholamreza Mansouri, the deception executed through the honey-trap had the goal to divert the attention from both target's cases of corruption to the still scandalous but less grave instance of a. romantic scandal. However, with all four cases, the overreaching goal of the variety of ways through which the deception of the honey-trap was executed, with a total of seventeen articles, is the reduction of power of the target in either one way or the other. In all four cases, the deception that was executed had the goal to take the power each of the four targets had either within the Iranian state system or on the narrative, reinforcing the significance of the main code *Threat* on the urgency to execute the deception. Lastly, two articles in a total of four paragraphs introduce a deceptive method which assumes that the repetition of the word swallow by politicians, journalists and the civil society leads to the legitimization of the phenomenon without any substantial evidence. In this way, both articles highlight that here the deception is not only that of the targets, but of the reader

itself and the wider civil society are targets of the deception, with the actual truth regarding the existence of the swallows becoming secondary. This is particularly highlighted in connection with Mitra Ostad and Shirin Najafi Zadeh (BBC Farsi, 2023).

In sum of chapter one, is evident that there are still many unanswered questions when it comes to the recruitment and personal background of the swallows. This aligns with the theory of queer intelligence outlined by Manjikian (2020), as it is the goal of intelligence agencies to reduce the leakage of personal information to the outside. However, what became clearer through the analysis of the news articles is the conception of who is being seen as a threat and how this threat is distinguished between internal and external targets. The analysis of the deception and how it is being reported within the news articles highlights the gendered framing that is being used to address the swallows as well as the secondary importance of their actual existence since the word is being repeatedly mentioned, the deception does not only happen to the target but directly to the reader as well, as the repetition of the term directly legitimizes the existence of the swallow (Amundsen, 2021).

Chapter 2- Objectification, Ideology and Force

This chapter will delve into addressing "the queerness" (Manjikian, 2020, p. 35) of the news media's framing of the intelligence agencies' honey-trapping methods. It is an interconnection between the gendered dimension with the use of swallow and the framing through the news articles. The gendered dimension is significant for the analysis since it gives insight into the general discourse around the use of swallows. As elaborated in the literature review, the Iranian security apparatus is built on an inherently patriarchal structure with many journalists taking the latter for granted when reporting on the topic. Certain words and framing methods of the swallows are picked up without a

necessary critical reflection. This chapter with the use of the main codes Force, Objectification, and Ideological Assumptions to analyze paragraphs of the articles with the aim to put the findings of chapter 1 into the context of Iran's security apparatus that is built on inherently patriarchal pillars (Keles, 2022).

Force

The main code Force, the aim is to analyze how and if the swallows were forced to execute the honey-trapping. Since upon the analysis it is rumored that many times that some women were forced to act as a swallow, this main code has the aim to analyze if force was used against the women, to address the rumors that some of the swallows were forced to execute the mission. This main code was deliberately put in the section of the gendered dimension since it further presents the gender-discriminatory nature of Iran's intelligence agencies and the Iranian state. Even though only limited information could be obtained on this main code, the articles do contain a strong gendered dimension when partially finding paragraphs stating if and how force was used against the swallows.

A total of five paragraphs from four different articles included information about an alleged use of force against the swallows. Three paragraphs include the case of Mitra Ostad, and two paragraphs include the case of Shirin Najafi. Mitra Ostads case is compared to a row of other women's names who were allegedly put into marriages with high government officials and then subsequently either disappeared or got murdered. The main reason only Mitra Ostads name got a significant amount of attention can be ascribed to the increase of online mass media communication within the last decade. Before that "the names of the women have been suffocated in the terrifying silence" (BBC Farsi, 2023). With the increase of open-source available media outlets, many have pushed the boundaries of reporting, even though the initial structure

and names of the Iranian intelligence agencies still lures in the dark. The brute force used against Mitra Ostad not solely by her husband but by the verbality of the news articles through the latter repeatedly calling her a swallow can be considered as a tactic of force. As there is no personal information about her previous life, it is unclear if she was forced to become Najafi's wife or if she was hired by the intelligence agencies to spy on Najafi. The analysis concludes that way Force was executed against her mainly happened through the repeated framing of her as swallow to possibly reduce the guilt sentence of Najafi in his trial. The blame is put here on Ostad to diminish the gravity of her murder through Najafi.

The remaining two paragraphs describe the abduction of Shirin Najafi after the kidnapping and execution of Ruhollah Zam in 2019. It is highlighted that Shirin Najafi is being held in one of the IRGC's secret prisons which are spread across the country. In the analyzed paragraphs her imprisonment is mainly being seen as an "immoral" and "brutal" act (Journalism is not a crime, 2021). One paragraph mentions that she might have been forced to contact Ruhollah Zam and become part of the espionage and that she had been in prison the whole of the time she was in touch with him. The way Force is described here refers to Shirin Najafi potentially being a victim of Iran's intelligence agencies herself, without having the agency to refuse the role as a swallow. Therefore, one cannot determine if Mitra Ostad was a swallow and if she was forced to get in touch with Najafi, however one can conclude that her being labelled a swallow after her death is another way of force being shown, it is just different from the definition of this main code. In this way, the secret space in which both swallow cases are moving in is narrow, therefore no absolute conclusion can be drawn from the analyzed data (Manjikian, 2020).

Objectification

The above-mentioned main code Force overlaps with the Objectification framing of the women in the news articles. A total of 13 paragraphs from nine different news articles contained paragraphs that objectified the phenomenon of the swallow within the intelligence context, adding to the sexualized and gendered language that reinforce the gender binary (Manjikian, 2020). All nine articles referred to the swallows as "birds of prey" indicating that the women are actively "hunting" (Baratinha, 2023) for their victims, creating a specific power dynamic within the paragraphs (Rouydad24, 2023; Radio Farda, 2019; BBC Farsi, 2023; Baratinha, 2023). By framing the discourse around the women as "birds of prey" the complex security and political structure of the Iranian security system is simplified, leaving out the great level of lack of information. The objectification of the women leads to the issue that neither their names, nor personal background nor reasons for their recruitment as swallows is being critically questioned. In comparison, all twenty-three articles did contain a level of critical reflection on the role, motivation, and position of the male targets, either defending their actions or protecting their level of dignity (Radio Farda, 2019; Baratinha, 2023; VOA, 2019; Ensaf News, 2018; Voice of Mihan, 2021). This main code presents that the swallows are moving in a parallel space where their personal narrative does not count anymore, yet it is all about their role as a spy. With this specific type of objectified framing, the existence of the swallow is reinforced and legitimized through the news articles.

Two paragraphs from two articles mention the patriarchal structure of the Iranian security structure, shifting the framing of the word swallow away from the personal responsibility of the women and towards the greater institutional structure of the state's security institutions (Khabaronline, 2019; BBC Persian, 2020). In this case, the job as a swallow is legitimized as well yet the structure through which it is emerged is more critically reflected upon. This is a crucial step within the discourse of intelligence literature since the spy herself has less responsibility for the kidnapping, murder, and embarrassment

of the target since it shows the greater institutional powers that play a role within the Iranian security apparatus.

In one article, it is emphasized that swallows intentionally abuse the triangle of lust, power and wealth depicting the work as a swallow from a romanticized perspective, as elaborated previously. Fitting into this narrative, three articles and a total of five paragraphs mention the sentences of one of the high positioned clerics, Abdullah Naseri, who accuses the women of being "bored widows from the martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war, now with no other choice than following their lust and utilizing it to manipulate innocent politicians and members of parliament" (Baratinha, 2023). This statement is connected solely to the internal targets which were discussed above. Even though Naseri apologized later publicly for this statement, the reason for it was the resulting sentiment of insult towards the fallen soldiers and less to the women themselves as elaborated in two paragraphs of one news article. One paragraph by Alef-News (2023) mentions that it is not in the hands of the women since their brain forces them to become "lustful swallows". In both instances it is the intentional objectification of the swallows as women that are bound to their instincts, taking away their ability of logical and rational decision-making. In contrast to male-spies that carry a certain level of prestige the swallows are labelled as lesser beings that are left with no choice than to hunt for their prey. The authors intentionally or unintentionally objectify the women as swallows to further reinforce the romanticization of them (Butler, 1988). In conclusion, the objectification of the swallows reinforces the images that one has about female intelligence agents. In the context of the Iranian security apparatus, it is interesting to see since four of the nine articles do acknowledge the patriarchal structure of the Iranian regime yet further legitimize the objectification of the swallows by repeatedly referring to them as "birds of prey" (Alef-News, 2023; Ensaf-News, 2019; BBC Persia, 2023; Sharavand, 2018).

Ideological Assumptions

Similarly, to the two main codes above, the ideological assumptions which are carried throughout the articles present twofold ways through which the existence of swallows is legitimized. The ideological assumptions in here share the similarity that all refer to a certain contradiction that comes with the existence of swallows within the Iranian security apparatus. A few specifically refer to the religious pillars of the state and how they stand in contradiction, the other mentions the contradiction between the use of swallows with feminist theories. The latter includes paragraphs from articles which argue that the use of swallows through Iranian intelligence agencies simply reinforces the patriarchal system of the Iranian state, therefore they aim to use feminist thoughts to criticize the existence of Iranian women used as swallows. In both instances the use of swallows is seen as inherently negative and in reducing the credibility in either ideology. From a total of sixteen paragraphs from thirteen different articles, seven deal with the contradiction of the swallows with feminist ideology and nine mention the contradiction between the use of swallows and Islam.

Two paragraphs directly mention that "the swallows are victims of the patriarchal system" therefore acknowledging the gender dimension within the framing of the issue at hand (Voice of Mihan, 2021). Similarly, another three paragraphs highlight that the labeling of Mitra Ostad as a swallow and the resulting killing of her does not pose as a security problem but sheds light on wider social issues within the country. The former demonstrates how the Iranian society should reconsider its view on women's rights. It is evident that for instance, the number of yearly honor-killings is around 200 per year with the unofficial numbers being even higher with less than 10% of the perpetuators being persecuted (Kar, 2007). Therefore, with regards to ideological standpoints a total of four paragraphs directly mention either the patriarchal structure of the

Iranian security system as an issue or the socio-political consequences that come with a ransom labeling by the media of women as swallows. The additional five paragraphs refer to feminist thoughts regarding the swallows being actual individuals with personal stories with a specific highlight on Mitra Ostad and Shirin Najafi being referred to as mothers and daughters, thus putting them into specific gender roles apart from the specific role as swallows. The paragraphs use feminist thoughts to criticize the existence of Iranian swallows, yet do not critically reflect the socio-political context of the Iranian state and the intelligence agencies. The main point of criticism is solely the fact that "swallows exist, and it reinforces a patriarchal system" (Radio Farda, 2019). There is no critical reflection on the role of Intelligence agencies in general and the missions for which the women are being utilized (Voice of Mihan, 2021; Ensaf News, 2019; Alef-News, 2023). In sum, the nine paragraphs mention sentences related to feminist theories and do acknowledge the patriarchal structure and traditional roles in which the women are being put and exploited, yet there is no critical reflection on the role of the media's framing and how the discourse might further fuel a gendered discourse and discriminatory reality.

On the other hand, nine paragraphs directly question the existence of swallows in connection to the theocratic state of Iran. On one hand, there are three paragraphs highlighting that the use of swallows can be justified in the Islamic Republic of Iran since these women use their "feminine charms" (Shahrvand, 2022) for a greater goal of securing the national security of the state. In fact, one paragraph refers to the example of Prophet Muhammad using his wives as spies to gather information about the plans of potential enemies to be able to infiltrate their plans. In some cases, his wives were pretending to have romantic interest to the men to be able to get the information. In another specific paragraph, it is highlighted that such as the "martyrs died for the peace inside Iran" the women can

sacrifice their "dignity" for the establishment of an enhanced security system and the abolishment of any opposing voice (Radio Farda, 2019). In these paragraphs, the authors concurs that the use of swallows by the intelligence agencies theoretically does not contradict to the pillars on which the Islamic republic of Iran is built upon since the women are being used for a greater good initially.

However, the remaining six paragraphs specifically mention that the foundation on which the Iranian regime is built contradicts with the use of swallows. All six paragraphs conclude that swallows do not exist since the intelligence agencies would never use a tactic like that since it would directly insult the divinity of the Supreme Leader. In one paragraph from an article which interviews of former member of parliament, Hejbi, the latter highlights that the pillars on which the Islamic republic was founded on are so strong that they would never let them get challenged through swallows that use "adultery" methods (Khabaronline, 2019). These articles intent to delegitimize the use of swallows through the intelligence agencies particularly highlighting that if women are labelled swallows is a construction of the media, not of the agencies themselves. Here it is less about the dignity of the women and more about the reputation of the agency. Therefore, it is aimed to defend the theocratic legitimacy of the Iranian state through delegitimizing the existence of swallows, leaving the main explanation of the latter again to "bored women that follow their instincts" (Ensaf-News, 2020). The ideological assumptions therefore show a clear disconnection between the feminist thought that legitimizes the use of swallows and the Islamic thoughts that aim to delegitimize that the swallows are being sent through official intelligence institutions.

In conclusion of the second chapter, it is evident that a total of nineteen out of twenty-three articles contained paragraphs that were systematically analyzed through the three main codes. Each paragraph included a gendered

dimension that highlights how news articles and the general discourse around swallows reinforces the pre-existing stereotypes around the use of female agents in the Iranian context. As elaborated by Manjikian (2020), the secrecy of being a spy allows public media outlets to frame the issue in ways that makes it look "queer" yet none of the articles critically reflect on the "queerness" (p. 45) of the swallows in the complex net of Iran's intelligence institutions. The latter indicates that even though there is an acknowledgement within the paragraphs on the unusualness of the Iranian intelligence agencies using swallows, there is no further critical reflection on why it is unusual and how it relates back to the societal, political and security realms of the state as a whole (Manjikian, 2020, p. 156) The closest one could get to the ideological underpinnings is from three articles which directly highlight that the use of swallows contradicts the theocratic pillars of the Iranian state, while other two articles highlight how the use of swallows reinforces the patriarchal pillars of the Iranian state. As elaborated above, the news articles differ in their perspective and closeness to the regime, therefore the analysis on which ideology they connect to the use of swallows and if they mention a positive or negative perspective on it further highlights how different media outlets can frame the issue. In the case of the 24 articles, surprisingly all paragraphs containing ideological assumptions legitimized the use of swallows just by simply taking over the term and connecting it to a certain ideology. In this way, even though unintentionally in some cases, they did legitimize the existence of the swallow (Amundsen, 2021). In conclusion, all three variables have shown the gendered dimension within the news articles.

Discussion

The analysis presents that the study opens a variety of complex facets when it comes to women affiliated with Iranian intelligence agencies. Neither hypothesis one nor hypothesis two can be rejected from the systematic analysis

of the news articles. Furthermore, even though research question 1 and 2 were discussed in seeming isolation from each other, the topics and themes analyzed overlap in their significance to one another. As a general statement it can be concluded that some of the information at hand appears to be based on rumors and speculations about the actual identity and role of the women in each of the four cases (Afary, 2010). Even though there is no denial that all four women were somewhat involved with the targets in the articles, it cannot be concluded that all four were actual swallows that were working for Iran's intelligence agencies. Even though the articles mentioning Farnaz Eftehkari and Sabreen Saeidi are convinced about them being swallows, it would be a scientific fallacy to have this as an absolute conclusion for this research (Peshkin, 1988). As no article features a former or active swallow, or an active member of the intelligence agencies, all conclusions must be taken with a grain of salt (Wege, 2019). It is also not clear to determine if the women were forced to get in touch with the men or if they went through the usual MOIS recruitment techniques as elaborated in the literature review (Wege, 2019). Reviewing the language of the news articles and referencing it back to the gender inequality state of the Iranian regime, there is a high possibility that the four women were either pushed into executing honey-traps or did so for financial reasons.

With regards to the first question of this study and the hypothesis that the Iranian intelligence structures do use swallows for honey-trapping, this *cannot* be rejected however there is a significant disconnection how the agencies approach these women and how they justify this with the Islamic pillars on which the Iranian state is being built (Akbarzadeh et. al, 20190. As the use of swallows is still a taboo-theme within the Iranian context, it is logical that not many articles do credibly thematize the topic and much of the information is left in the dark (Moghissi, 2008). For instance, a credible question to ask is how someone like Sabreen Saeidi who according to three newspaper articles had relatives that were killed through the Iranian regime due to their activism for the

Arab minority, got in the position to honey-trap the co-founder of the Arab movement Habib Chaab (Skynews, 2022). This leaves one only with further speculations that she was probably forced to do so. Therefore, this aspect leaves great room for further investigation on the topic. The issue of the "closeted spy" which Manjikian (2020) repeatedly emphasizes throughout her book, can be perfectly transferred to the cases of the four alleged swallows, yet a further investigation on how particularly secret force is used in these instances would be appreciated from further research. It is no secret that authoritarian regimes such as the Iranian state often force citizens to follow the formers demands (Akbarzadeh et. al, 2019), still regarding the precarity and seduction method of the honey-trapping, it leaves one with a great level of contradiction to the official level of the state (Hieber, 2005). Is there a deliberate use of these women and the state just officially neglects the assumptions, as the interviews with former MP Hejbi and Cleric Naseri have shown, or is it done with a clear intention to exempt these honey-trapping method from the gender discriminatory nature of the state (BBC Persian, 2022; Ensaf-News, 2022). In any case, one could conclude that the Iranian regime does use women for honey-trapping opposing voices. This highlights a new angle of the Iranian state reinforcing the gender discrimination through its intelligence institutions, with female agents being structurally disadvantaged in general, yet can be used for seduction methods when it comes to sustaining the regimes legitimacy.

Furthermore, the analysis of the news articles presents that in some cases such as Mitra Ostad, it was not even necessary for her to be an actual swallow, yet she was labelled as such to sustain the image of her murderer Najafi (Christensen, 2018). In this way, the gender discriminatory nature of the Iranian state is again being reinforced, showing that the term itself can be deliberately used to diminish the worth of a woman to save the dignity of someone that committed a gender-based crime (Afary, 2010). The question of the swallows used by the Iranian intelligence agencies is more one of the structures of the

Iranian state as a whole and how it perpetuates certain norms and values when it comes to women. Since this cannot be concluded as an absolute solely through the analysis this study, it leaves a great and important space for further research on the phenomenon.

Lastly, the most robust finding is that the consideration of what constitutes a threat in the eyes of the Iranian intelligence according to the four cases and the analysis of the articles is that there is a division within internal and external targets. The internal targets were two men who were part of the political system and participated in the institutional facilitated bribery (Golkar, 2012). Heneceforth, the Iranian intelligence put swallows on them to divert the attention from their actual crimes to a banal romantic scandal (Radio Farda, 2019; BBC Farsi, 2022; Ensaf News, 2018). Therefore, two thirds of the news articles that contained information about the internal targets can be classified as close to the regime and tried to put a blame onto them. It is not to say that the women should be free from the blame, yet a system that continually perpetuates gender discrimination cannot be freed from the responsibility when it comes to the creation and discourse around the term of swallow (Butler, 1988). Particularly with the instance of Gholhamreza Mansouri, it is speculated that the Iranian intelligence agencies purposely put a swallow on him so that he will not be able to get caught and stand trial in the International Criminal Court, since he was responsible for the mass-executions of political prisoners in 1988 (Amnesty International, 2023). This would provide a reason on why the Iranian intelligence agency would put a swallow on him that would influence him to flee Iran and perhaps cover his murder as suicide, since a "dead man cannot stand trial anymore" (Dodds, 2011, p. 35). In this way, Mansouri was not able to confess his crimes against humanity which he executed in the name of the Iranian state and thus would reinforce a state image which delegitimizes the theocratic pillars on which the Iranian regime is built on (Kar, 2007). Therefore, the swallow Eftehkari is still unknown in her whereabouts and actual identity

until now, since the Iranian intelligence held her "in the closet" (Manjikian, 2020, p. 156) to further sustain the queer dimension of the Iranian state.

With the external targets both were strong opposition voices with a fair amount of popularity. They also de-legitimized and threatened the legitimacy of the regime through their activism. Therefore, the swallows were used to lur them to a specific location and gain valuable knowledge from them and for both in the end to be kidnapped back to Iran and then executed. These tragic examples not only show the capability of Iran's HUMINT operations abroad and the cybersphere, but also shed light to how much it sees opposition voices in the Iranian diaspora as a threat to its legitimacy (Ra'ees & Kamal, 2019). Since activists in the diaspora have a greater amount of freedom to criticize the regime openly, they can address a greater variety of issues including class, ethnic minorities, and gender discriminatory laws (Moghissi, 20080. However, it also leaves them vulnerable to HUMNIT operations and show the core human need for emotional validation and love (Manjikian, 2020). The latter two are being tactically instrumentalized through the Iranian intelligence agencies' use of swallows. Again, it is interesting considering the theocratic and conservative nature of the Iranian state (Golkar, 2012). As for the second research question and hypothesis, the analysis has shown that there is a strong gendered dimension not only with the use of swallows through Iranian intelligence agencies but also through the framing of the issue in Iranian and English speaking online news outlets, therefore the second hypothesis also cannot be rejected at this point of the analysis. In all 24 articles, the issue of swallows was meet with criticism, either stemming from a critical study or a theocratic point of view. It appears that everyone has been able to get a voice inside of the discourse apart from the women themselves, leaving here as well as disconnection between how the issue is being reported and what the labelled swallows themselves might say.

In sum, the discussion leaves important questions for future researchers to examine. Even though both hypotheses cannot be rejected to an extent that the Iranian regime does seem to use swallows or at least this information is being spread around Iranian news outlets, since some that are closely regime affiliated thematized and legitimized the issue (Christensen, 2018). Furthermore, there is a strong gendered element when it comes to the language used in the news articles and the whole recruitment process and use of the swallows for honey-trapping opposing voices, it still cannot be concluded how the Iranian regime gets to these women in the first place, especially considering the critical and free background of three of them. Farnaz Eftehkari was studying in Paris, Shirin Najafi was supposedly under asylum in Turkey and Sabreen Saeidi was living in London. This analysis ultimately concludes that Iranian women are being recruited as swallows through Iran's intelligence agencies, yet most of the recruitment occurs in such a secrecy, that further in-depth research into the topic will facilitate drawing greater generalizable conclusions (Serscikov, 2023).

Conclusion

Placing the results of the analysis and the implications of the discussion again in the context of Iran's current political situation of internal turmoil, it is evident that Iran's intelligence agencies use every possible method to sustain the legitimacy of the Iranian regime.The results not only confirm the queerness of being a spy as laid out by Manjikian (2020) but further highlight the necessity to shed light on taboo topics within the field. The variety of facets that come with the use of swallows by Iranian intelligence agencies were able to be separated and analyzed through the critical evaluation of the gendered dimension and wider implications that were previously laid out through Manjikian's (2020) theory of the nexus between gender, sexuality, and intelligence studies. The critical evaluation of the online news articles on their gender biases, highlighting the queerness of the state with regards to the use of swallows further implies the significance to analyze phenomena and processes

within the intelligence field from a critical studies perspective (Bean, 2018). Moreover, the study of the use of swallows by Iranian intelligence agencies presents a multi-faceted picture with the phenomena touching on issues of feminism, intelligence studies but also on geopolitics, counterintelligence, and media studies alike. It further presents that the case of Iranian swallows does not only shed light on the institutional challenges and structures within Iranian intelligence agencies, but also throughout the whole system of the Iranian state itself (Andrew, 2010).

The chase of Habib Chaab perfectly presents the regimes anxiety of opposition voices declaring their support for ethnic minorities within the country who are evidently being structurally discriminated (Akbarzadeh at. al, 2019; Ra'ees & Kamal, 2019). Even though this discrimination has been perpetuated from the former Shah Era (1925-1979), it has been reinforced through the surveillance of opposition voices internally and externally through the current Iranian intelligence agencies. The choice to use a swallow on Chaab proved to be successful because the swallow Sabreen Saeidi herself is part of the Arab ethnic minority. Their relation was one of several years and the trust that Chaab gained from their bond exceeded the fear of getting caught by Iranian intelligence forces. Even though their creation of a romantic bond might go against the theocratic pillars and official narrative of the Iranian state, the intelligence agencies saw this as the only option to get their hands on Chaab (BBC News, 2022). With regards to Chaab, the case of Ruhollah Zam shows the general anxiety the state develops once an opposing voice gains a certain level of popularity (Manjikian, 2020). The Iranian regime with both of their cases exploited feelings of loneliness and helplessness of exiled Iranians that have their hopes on a regime change. These feelings of alienation from the society they live in gives futile ground for the use of swallows, that through the emotional connection enable a bond of vulnerability where secrets will and can be laid out. As Manjikian (2020) analyzes, even though the study of intelligence

is connected to a high level of secrecy with high stakes on each mission, one cannot forget basic human needs and emotions, with the spies also just being humans giving them a great tactic to weaponize emotions.

Turning into the internal mirror, the cases of Eftehkari and Ostad provide a different conclusion, one of the corrupted schemes of Iran's political elite itself, with women frequently being utilized to divert the attention from corruption scandals, since the latter directly goes against the pillars of the theocratic regime (Afary, 2010). Since the Iranian regimes propaganda is built upon that every person in power is a qualified and important religious authority, cases of corruption are even more grave than in non-theocratic countries. The swallows in this case, might not even be actual swallows but are just spouses/wives/friends of the members. Here, the media uses the languages and narratives of the swallows to divert attention from the responsibility of the political MP to the "rottenness" (p. 542) of a woman, further reinforcing the gender-discriminatory structure of the Iranian regime (Moghissi, 2008). It appears that for the Iranian regime, its ideological pillars are important and anyone aiming de-legitimize will be removed.

A very significant side-effect of the use of swallows, internally and externally is the generation of paranoia within the Iranian society and Iranian diaspora abroad (Kar, 2007). Since the swallows created long-term bonds with the targets, which then was publicized in popular opposition news articles, there is a general fear that any new Iranian one meets outside of the country could be a potential spy. This side-effect using swallows can be tied back to a real method of intelligence agencies which is the infiltration of the targets mind, with the targets not being able to think rational and straight anymore (Banerjea, 2015). As for the Iranian regime, every critical voice can be a potential target, the generation of distrustfulness and paranoia throughout the whole Iranian society and diaspora minimizes the potential for the groups to mobilize and come

together (Banerjea, 2015). In this way, the swallows do not only silence the targets, but might also silence the potential mobilization of Iranians internally and externally. This aspect could be potentially investigated through future research to analyze the actual implications of generating distrust among one's own population. As Manjikian (2020) but also Kar (2007), Moghissi (2008) and Afary (2010) have highlighted, the gender-discrimination of the Iranian regime could be reinforced through this feeling of distrust. Since the case of swallows has been reported not only by news outlets that oppose the narrative of the Iranian regime, but also by some that are close to it, the gender-discriminatory language compared with this possibility that everyone can be targeted, might reduce the trust of the people in women in general, therefore reinforcing gender-stereotypes and prejudices such as that women are in the end "backstabbing and pillow talking snakes" (Moghissi, 2008, p. 551). Even though these are all speculations, they do highlight the great implications a method that seemingly seems so small can have in the end on the framing and opinion of a whole society.

Implications of the study for the future

In addition, future research on the topic of Iranian swallows could focus on a variety of aspects of this-multi-faceted study. For instance, one could analyze how the case of swallows leads to the legitimization or delegitimization of the Iranian regime through conducting surveys with the Iranian public. If one will observe further cases where swallows have been used, one could focus if they also fit the internal/external scheme that has been showed within this study. One could also aim with a great level of precautions to interview former swallows that have been active for the Iranian intelligence agencies. On the other hand, one could also focus on the gendered dimension of the study and for instance analyze how the Iranian society/media view women with relation to the

discourse around the term swallow and if it enhances the discourse or diminishes it.

A particular focus should be put on the implications of ethnic minorities within Iran and how the use of swallows might differ when it comes to the different ethnic groups. Moreover, research on the general intelligence methods used by current Iranian intelligence agencies on ethnic minorities within Iran and on the Iranian diaspora could be a further important point for research. One could also conduct a historical analysis on intelligence operations conducted against ethnic minorities under the Monarchy with comparison to the time now. For instance, it was common practice under Shah Pahlavi, to use his intelligence agency SAVAK to arrest teachers in the Kurdish areas, who were speaking Kurdish to the children, even though in most cases, the children were only literate in Kurdish (Ra'ees & Kamal, 2019). The structural discrimination of ethnic minorities within Iran has only been reinforced through the Iranian regime, therefore an analysis on how the methods have changed would be of great interest, particularly with regards to the current internal turmoil within the country. A sad reality is that the lives of women of the ethnic minorities of Iran, particularly Kurdish, suffer greatly from structural discrimination, making them the most vulnerable but perhaps also the most lucrative targets for recruitment (Akbarzadeh et. al, 2019). Again, further research into this interplay would benefit the general discourse on the topic.

Furthermore, one could expand this study and compare it to other cases where female agents are either being used as swallows or being labelled as such in other countries within the Global South for further comparing the different methods, operations but also language used with which the topic is being dealt with, with regards to a great variety and spectrum of actors. For instance, some cases have been rumored that deal with the new phenomenon of Chinese swallows that are being used to honey-trap US members of parliament (New

York Post, 2020). One could analyze similarities and differences between the use of swallows of Iranian and Chinese intelligence agencies and how the discourse around swallows might be different in the context of China. Other instances such as the Israeli Mossad which also uses honeytraps frequently pose great material for cross-comparison since both actors proved themselves influential within the MENA region and comparing their use of methods will enhance the scientific credibility of the study and show the generalization of the findings (Hounam, 2004). Lastly, another interesting aspect for future research could be the interplay between Iranian intelligence agencies and the Iranian mafia with which they allegedly frequently cooperate with (Wege, 2019). It would be interesting to analyze how they stay in touch, who this mafia is and in which neighboring countries they are active. A great starting point for this would be the intelligence activities occurring between Iran and Turkey, since the border between both countries is frequently being used for intelligence agents being smuggled and out of the country, conducting a variety of different operations as for instance kidnappings (Stratfor, 2020).

In conclusion, this study succeeded in showing the multi-faceted aspects with which the topic at hand can be analyzed through. Iran's intelligence agencies will continue to operate missions inside and outside of the country, with the suppression of opposition voices being one of the primary goals of them. Therefore, the use of swallows presents a great potential in future missions of Iran's intelligence agencies (Serscikov, 2023). One should continue to critically reflect on how this issue will be reported in the media and what implications it can have on the feelings of the wider society on women and women's issues. One thing that is clear that the international community should not underestimate the lengths the theocratic Iranian regime will go to uphold its legitimacy.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: **Main codes related to research question 1.**

Main Code	Definition
Recruitment	The collection of paragraphs related to this variable include inferences such as "the woman was recruited through...", "she was approached by agency…", "the swallows are trained in…", "the institutions dealing with swallows…". The identification of specific paragraphs is grounded in the context of the information presented and cannot be studied in isolation. Any information that is being presented in the context about potential ways of how the swallows get recruited will be coded with this main code.
Deception	The identification of paragraphs that have inferences about how the honey-trapping was executed. It includes for instances "the target was lured through text messages…", "her young looks deceived her identity" and other methods mentioned on how

	the deception and honey-trap was executed.
Targets internal	The identification of who the internal targets are and what makes them targets. Is their role within the Iranian system elaborated and how is their motive as a target inside Iran being constructed.
Targets External	The identification of who the external targets are and what constitutes them as targets. Is it for instance their role in an outside opposition party or a vocal opposing activism. Do they have a level of popularity among Iranians inside and outside of Iran or are they simply diaspora Iranians, or not even Iranians at all.
Threat	The classification of Iran's intelligence agency on what constitutes a threat. For instance, do paragraphs have inferences about "the MOIS particularly sees this as a threat", or "The IRGC was advised to target individuals who voice opposition about ethnic minorities...".

Closetedness	Refers to the background and private facts publicly available about the swallows. Is there any personal background information mentioned about the swallows, do the news articles thematize it what their private lives have been like. It also shows if this is even important for them.

Appendix 2: Main codes related to research question 2.

Main Code	Definition
Objectification	The identification of paragraphs that contain inferences about objectifying the swallows. This includes for instance mentioning their physical attributes in connection with seducing the targets as well as metaphors that intend to objectify them completely in their role as a swallow.
Ideology	The identification of paragraphs makes inferences about an apparent ideological standpoint from which the text is written. Does it already address the gendered dimension of

	the phenomenon. In contrast, does it come from a theocratic standpoint referencing Islam.
Force	The identification of paragraphs that have inferences about potential force used against the women to operate as a swallow. This includes for instance paragraphs such as "the swallow could not step back from the task", or "she was threatened to focus on the target". It is to ensure that the socio-political context of Iran's intelligence agencies will be considered during the analysis, not forgetting the systematic discrimination of women inside the country.

Appendix 3: Classification of online news outlets.

Online news website	Language	Regime-Closeness	Country of Issue	Nr of articles found
Al-arabiya Farsi	Farsi	Opposition	Saudi-Arabia	1
Alef News	Farsi	Close	Iran	1
Baratinha	Farsi	Middle	Iran	2
BBC Persian	Farsi	Middle	United Kingdom	3

Donya-e Eqtesad	Farsi	Close	Iran	1
Ensaf News	Farsi	Middle	Iran	2
Jahannews	Farsi	Close	Iran	1
Khabar-online	Farsi	Close	Iran	1
Radio Farda	Farsi	Opposition	Czech Republic	2
Rouydad24	Farsi	Close	Iran	1
Shahrvand	Farsi	Opposition	Canada	1
Voice of Mihan	Farsi	Close	Iran	1
Voice of America Farsi	Farsi	Middle	United States of America	1
BBC	English	Middle	United Kingdom	1
NCRI-Iran	English	Opposition	France	1
Skynews	English	Middle	United Kingdom	1
Times of Israel	English	Opposition	Israel	1
The Jerusalem Post	English	Opposition	Israel	1
Washington Post	English	Middle	United States of America	1

A link to a Google Docs with an overview of the latent QCA of all 24 articles:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/17Ut9rOIMaOIr7UqxPIkVX_xL5yfDPT
pAbvaUrxrrY3I/edit?usp=sharing