

Title: Hazing Iran: Satellite Imagery, Human Rights, and City as Camp

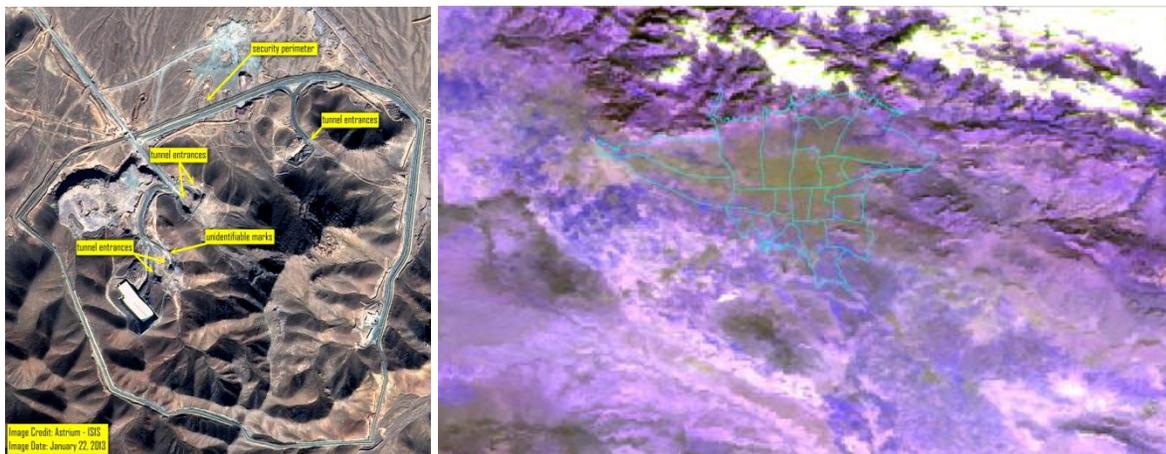
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Abstract:



(left: Astrium Satellite image of Fordow fuel enrichment site from January 22nd, 2013, labeled by ISIS—Institute for Science and International Security)

(right: MODIS Satellite image of Tehran smog, edited in Iranian scientific study “Application of satellite data and GIS in studying air pollutants in Tehran”)

As perhaps most obviously evidenced in the political maneuverings that led up to the second Gulf War in 2003, the use of satellite imagery to document spatial terrain is often, and almost instantly, politicized. In the two images presented here, this politicization takes on a two-way relationship and is open to contrasting and inevitably dualistic readings. One way of describing their relationship is as “Target” and “Aftermath”. On the left, we have an image of the nuclear plant near the Iranian city of Qom, annotated in this version by the US security services to highlight ‘suspicious’ activity said to evidence the nuclear ambitions of the Iranian government. On the right, we are presented with an image of Tehran under heavy smog in 2013 released by the Iranian government itself. Although the official Iranian explanation for this smog is the general population density and industrialization of the city, it has now been acknowledged, or is at least extensively argued, that the pollution it documents is a direct result of the economic sanctions imposed by the United States in 2010 that banned the sale of refined fuel to the country. Facing a major

energy crisis that would completely stall the economy, the Iranian government opted to produce a “bathtub mix” of far inferior quality oil that has been releasing deadly exhaust into the already dense air of Iran for the past three years.

The “Target”, as the first image shows, is Iran’s nuclear program, which lies at the crux of complicated historical animosities currently evident between the US and Iranian governments. Taken at very high resolution (2.5 meters per pixel) from outer space, the image presents itself as tunnel-vision precision — each point is a piece of data and each piece of data details coordinates, date, and time. It is on the back of such supposed satellite precision that the crippling economic sanctions of the US’s policy of containment are justified. However, the *aftermath* of these sanctions has not been the cessation of Iran’s nuclear program, but rather the suffocation of Tehran. Indeed, it has been argued that the inhabitants of Tehran are almost literally “choking to death”. By the standards of the sanctions’ purported aims, the result seems more an egregious misfire than a successful piece of foreign policy.

The reality behind these images and their conflicting ascribed narratives is far from clear. The effects on the people of Iran are also not only equally unclear, they are deliberately hazed. Employing Giorgio Agamben’s notions of the abstraction of the citizen to ‘bare life’ and its corollary of the ‘Camp’ as the ‘Nomos’ of the Modern, this paper attempts to decipher these images, their politicized readings, and the way in which the sites of human life in and near their locations – the occupants of the city of Qom in the first instance and those of Tehran in the second – have been conspicuously erased. It will argue that this visual erasure from spatial representation has fundamental implications for the human rights of the inhabitants of these cities and, by extension, Iran and a politicized world more generally. In doing so, it will suggest that as spaces and places of political conflict are ever more frequently presented through the medium of the satellite image, a deeply politicized reading of their structures, narratives and spatial representative techniques becomes ever more important.