

5. WRITER'S BLOCK: IRANIAN LITERARY CENSORSHIP AND DIASPORA PUBLISHING

by James Marchant



Free from the obligation to have texts vetted by hard-nosed censors, online diaspora publishers have provided Iranian writers with a means of escaping the tight confines of the domestic market, and connect them with a worldwide readership.

It is commonly said that all Iranian homes will possess at least two books: the Qur'an, and the poetry of Hafez's *Divan*. Iran's rich literary culture has played an important role in forging a sense of national identity and has had a profound influence on the development of Islamic philosophy and culture. But today, the country's most talented authors, poets, and publishers are under siege from the Islamic Republic's conservative establishment. Their works are subjected to the state censor's thick red marker pen, and acts of literary subversion can result in harsh jail sentences.

With Iranian literature robbed of much of its power to challenge and critique the political order, authors are forced to either shroud their messages in innumerable layers of allegory and metaphor, or else look further afield to get published.

This chapter offers an overview of the state of book publishing in Iran, explaining how the industry has fought for survival under authoritarian regimes before and after 1979, and describing the hurdles prospective authors must overcome to get their work past the censors at the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG). It also shows how technological developments have allowed organisations based in the diaspora to emerge as leading hubs of activity and innovation in the Iranian literary world.

Revolutionary Road: Publishing and the Iranian Revolution

Literary censorship was not a striking new innovation of the post-revolutionary regime; it was practiced by Iranian authorities long before the 1979 Revolution that swept Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini to power. This segment discusses how literary censorship evolved under the Pahlavi regime, eventually serving as the basis for the Islamic Republic's own harsh censorship programme.

Red Roses Are Forbidden - Pre-Revolutionary Literary Censorship

The roots of Iran's tight censorship programme stretch back into the pre-revolutionary past and are closely intertwined with those of the country's fearsome intelligence services. Ever since the formation of SAVAK in 1957, literary works have been subject to extensive scrutiny from authorities, who have feared the subversive and revolutionary potential of the written word.

These fears were not without basis; Iranian authors were deeply politicised throughout the Pahlavi period. The acclaimed writer Houshang Golshiri attested to this, describing how Iranian literature had become little more than a 'vehicle for political analysis' in late Pahlavi Iran:

If people had forgotten the events of [the 1953 coup against Mossadegh], literature intended to somehow transmit this information, because the mass media would not do so. Or, for instance, if torture existed in prisons, in essence, if strugglers were arrested and prisons existed, literature accepted the responsibility of transmitting even such simple bits of information.

Houshang Golshiri (in Ghanoonparvar, 1985: 354-5)

Leftist authors and commentators dominated the Iranian intelligentsia through the 1950s, 60s and 70s, and bore the brunt of SAVAK's censorial campaign as a result. Books that criticised the Shah's regime or promoted political radicalism were blacklisted and banned.¹ Forbidden texts formed the basis of a literary black market, with 'white cover books' (named for their anonymous white dust covers) available 'under the counter' in specialist bookshops (Mahloujian, 2002).

¹

Even books available on the shelves could get readers in trouble. In some cases, sales were monitored by SAVAK, and customers could face a visit from the police, or even imprisonment if they took home the wrong book (Sandler, 1986: 3)

The Pahlavi state didn't just censor books after they hit the shelves. Prior to publication, all books had to gain licensing approval from the

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Dowlatabadi was famed for his 3000-page epic *Kelidar*, which followed several generations of a Kurdish nomadic family. Grounded in rough, everyday language, it aimed to give voice to the lived experiences of rural life in Iran, and became very popular among left-wing activists.

Ministry of Culture and Art (Mollanazar, 2010: 167). Keyword blacklists were devised to help censors sniff out any dissenting authors injecting politically inflammatory terms into their literature. These forbidden terms included 'black night' (taken to indicate repression and despair), 'high walls' (coded language for imprisonment), and even 'red rose' (an international symbol of socialist solidarity and revolution) (Mahloujian, 2002).

Even authors who managed to evade the censors sometimes became victims of the state's paranoia. The nationally celebrated author Mahmoud Dowlatabadi was imprisoned by SAVAK from 1974-6.² When he asked his captors what crime he had been charged with, they replied:

None. But everyone we arrest seems to have copies of your novels

SAVAK Officer (in Rohter, 2012)

Iranian authors are no strangers to censorship, harassment, and imprisonment. Pre-publication censorship has remained a tool of the establishment for many decades, long preceding the Islamic Revolution, though the rules have become more stringent since 1979. More topics have been ruled out of bounds, and the censors have tightened up their censorship processes to make publishing even more difficult for Iran's writers.

No Time For Books: Revolution, War, and the Written Word

The period immediately following the Islamic Revolution was one of great openness. With the fall of the Shah, 'white cover' books flooded into the markets, and the Pahlavi state's censorship apparatus was buried along with SAVAK. One commentator stated in 1981 that:

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Iran has witnessed a period of apparently free journalistic and literary activities. But... the real reason for the proliferation of political publishing is the lack of control over the affairs of the country.

Wolfgang Behn (1981: 10)

This situation didn't last. As the Islamic Republic reasserted the authority of central government, it brought the intelligence establishment back from the grave, and absorbed Iran's censorship apparatus into the new Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

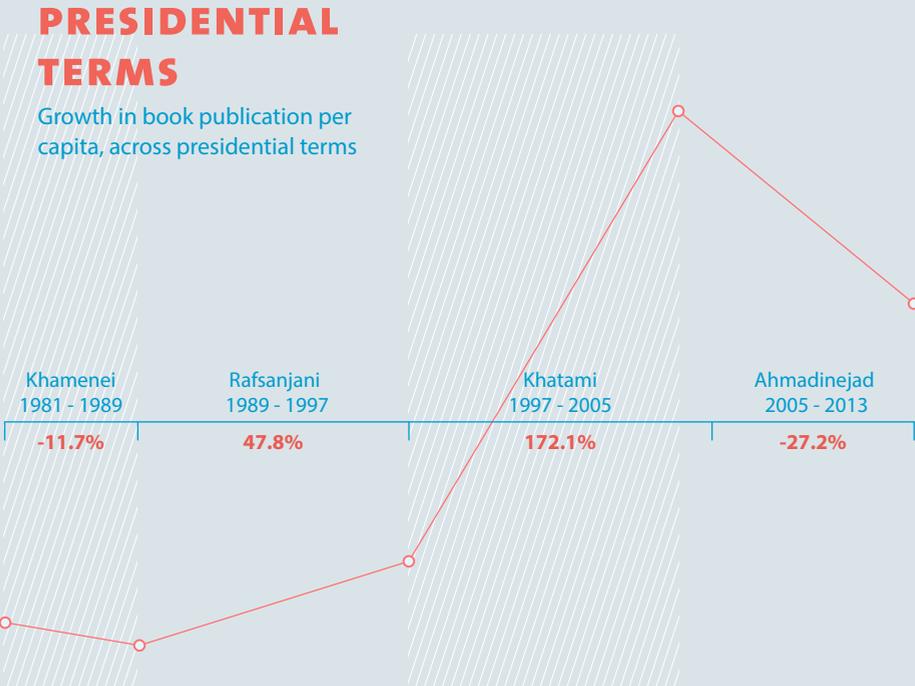
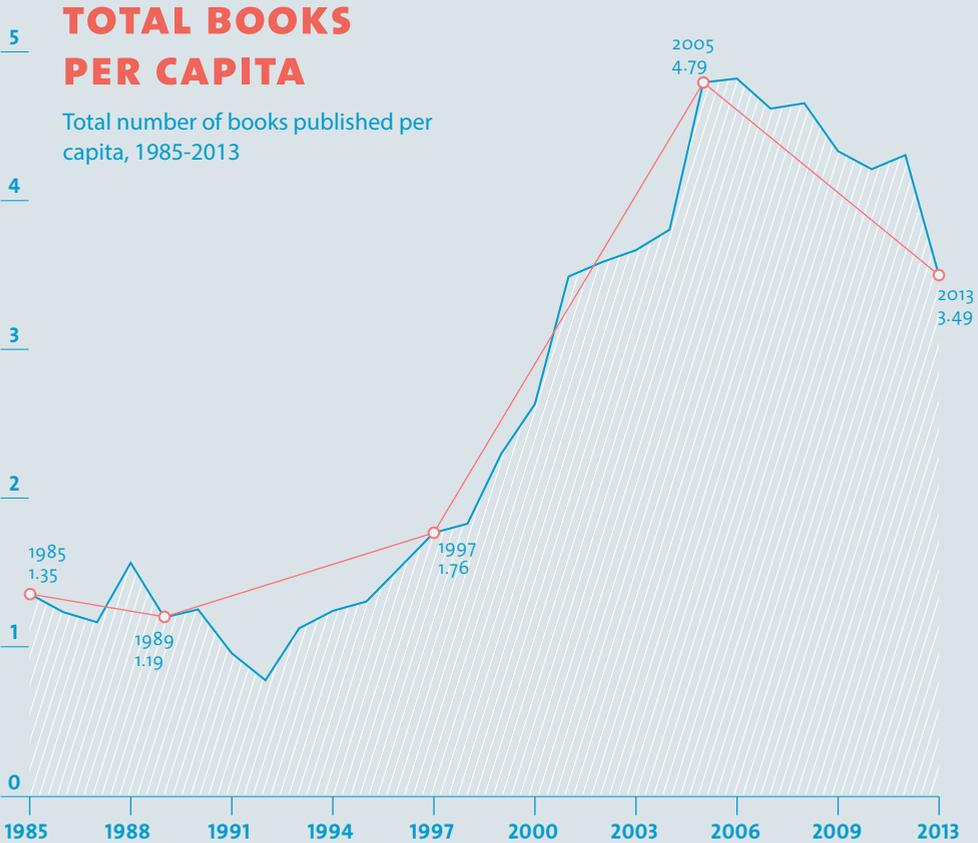


figure 1: PUBLICATION STATISTICS 1985-2013

First censoring books about the Pahlavi monarchy, the MCIg soon extended its blacklist to include any texts contravening conservative interpretations of Islamic law, including leftist political or philosophical works, along with many scientific volumes concerning controversial topics such as Darwinian evolution (Mahloujian, 2002). In the early post-revolutionary period, the MCIg was assisted in this cultural purge by Hezbollahi militias that attacked bookshops and burned 'immoral' books en masse (Ibid).

The onset of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) deepened the crisis facing Iranian authors and publishers. While left-wing authors were pushed out of the public sphere, religious writers and poets were promoted to produce war-themed works (Talattof, 2000: 124) and advance state ideology (Ibid: 134)

Trade blockades, paper rationing, and an intensification of wartime censorship policies further precipitated the collapse of the publishing sector (Mahloujian, 2002). Iran's 'Cultural Revolution' (1980-87) squeezed academics and publishers, as universities were closed and books banned.³ The dire predicament of the industry is illustrated by official publication figures from Iran's National Library (see Figure 1), showing a gradual decline in the number of books published until the close of the war in 1988.

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The 'Cultural Revolution' began in 1980 under the supervision of Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini, with the intention of injecting Islamic culture and values into society. The Cultural Revolution primarily targeted Iran's universities, and saw the large-scale purging of ideologically-suspect lecturers and student leaders.

In 1989 Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was elected as President on a platform of radical economic reform and post-war reconstruction. To this end, his office launched a reform program consisting of two Five-Year Plans, the first being focused on infrastructure development, economic liberalisation, and extensive healthcare and education reforms. Publishing received minimal state support during this period, and the sector struggled along with the rest of the economy.

The effect of economic decay was severe. Despite Rafsanjani's appointment of the liberal Mohammad Khatami as Cultural Minister from 1989-92, official figures show a decline in per capita publication figures over this period (see Figure 1). These numbers remained stagnant until 1995, when the Iranian economy began to show early signs of post-war economic recovery (though this recovery was hampered by the imposition of US sanctions in the same year).

Rafsanjani failed to expend any significant political capital on cultural liberalisation. Cultural politics remained in the shadow of the war and

revolution throughout the mid-1990s, with conservative pragmatists dominating the political sphere. It would take the reformist political landslide of 1997 to change all that.

Damage Limitation - The Khatami Era

The 1997 election of Rafsanjani's reformist Cultural Minister Mohammad Khatami to the presidency signalled a dramatic shift in the rhetoric and practice of literary censorship in the Islamic Republic. The appointment of more liberal Cultural Ministers, such as Ata'ollah Mohajerani and Ahmad Masjed-Jamei saw the MCIG take a more permissive approach to publishing. The comparatively *laissez faire* approach to censorship in the Khatami-era MCIG is reflected in the rapid growth of official publication figures from 1997-2005 (see figure 1).

But conservative opponents in parliament remained a thorn in the side of the Khatami administration. Parliament forced the resignation of Mohajerani in 2000 and blocked reformist efforts to simplify the MCIG's complex pre-publication censorship process in 2003 (Small Media, 2011: 20).

Frustrated by their inability to take an active role in managing and shaping Iran's cultural landscape, political conservatives instead engaged in large-scale campaigns of slander and misinformation about high-profile Iranian writers and journalists (ibid: 8). Hardline elements in the Information Ministry were also implicated in the 'Chain Murders' of a number of notable dissident writers and publishers such as Dariush Forouhar, Ebrahim Zalzadeh, and Mohammad Mokhtari (Sahimi, 2009).⁴

⁴ The 'Chain Murders' were a series of killings of dissident Iranian writers, journalists and activists between 1988 and 1998. Although the Intelligence Ministry was blamed for the murders, international courts have ruled that they were undertaken with the full knowledge of President Rafsanjani and Supreme Leader Khamenei. For more information, see: (Sahimi, 2009)

Although Khatami's government was eventually able to root out and prosecute the officers responsible for the killings, the crisis was a stark reminder to Iran's intelligentsia that reformist politicians could only do so much to protect them from the retribution of hardline elements in the state establishment.

Although Khatami was ultimately unable to effect a concrete and long-term transformation of the relationship between the MCIG's censors and Iran's publishing sector, his government was at least capable of limiting the excesses of the conservative establishment, and granting authors and publishers some space for free expression.

Damage Escalation - Eight Years of Ahmadinejad

The long resurgence of Iran's publishing sector under Khatami stalled with the ascendance of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency. During his administration, the MCIG once again took up position as the stern arbiter and enforcer of Islamic cultural values, while the conservative press was empowered to tear chunks out of opposition intellectuals and writers.

Overt acts of repression against intellectuals began soon after Ahmadinejad's inauguration. One of the first major crackdowns on the literary establishment took place in 2007, when a number of popular 'cafe bookshops' were closed down by state authorities. Although officially closed on the basis of legal technicalities,⁵ the owner of the bookshop Badragheye Javidan was told by one official:

All of the cultural depravity in this country stems from bookshops such as yours.

Unnamed government official (in Small Media, 2012: 23)

This crackdown was accompanied by a general tightening of regulations at the MCIG under Ahmadinejad's hardline Cultural Minister Mohammed Hossein Saffar-Harandi. Saffar-Harandi oversaw the government's policy of demanding the 'renewal' of all publishing permits issued before 2005, resulting in massive processing backlogs at the MCIG (International Publishers Association, 2009: 7). Many books permitted by the Khatami administration were blacklisted after 2005, with Saffar-Harandi insisting that his MCIG's tougher measures were necessary to stop publishers from serving "a poisoned dish to the young generation" (Tait, 2006).

These policies saw a decline in the number of books published (see Figure 1), and the outright ban of numerous works from internationally acclaimed authors.⁶ The policies of Saffar-Harandi did much to reverse the advances made under Khatami, with numerous domestically produced novels (such as Ebrahim Golestan's *The Cock*) also failing to get past the Ahmadinejad-era MCIG censors (Kamali Dehghan, 2008).

Harassment and intimidation of writers skyrocketed during Ahmadinejad's second term. The chaos of the post-2009 presidential election protests unleashed a wave of reaction from the state and its

⁵ Authorities insisted that commercial properties could not operate as bookshops and cafes simultaneously.

⁶ The Ahmadinejad-era reforms saw works banned from authors including:

Gabriel Garcia Marquez // *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*— Banned after the publication of a furious article in conservative newspaper *Tabnak*, despite previously having been granted a license by Saffar-Harandi's MCIG

Fyodor Dostoyevski // *The Gambler*— A short novel following the various gambles (figurative and literal) undertaken by Russian aristocrats and their staff

Tracy Chevalier // *Girl With A Pearl Earring*— A bestselling historical novel imagining the relationship between artist Johannes Vermeer and his servant (and model) Griet

Sadeq Hedayat // *The Blind Owl*— A surreal, subversive work from 1930s Iran, by a prominent secularist author

supporters. A 2011 IHRDC report suggests that the Basij-aligned 'Soft Security Strategic Think Tank' published a report in 2009 accusing seven publishers and dozens of writers and translators of conspiring with the 'Green Movement' to overthrow the Islamic Republic (2011: 10-11). Such accusations preceded a large-scale assault on the publishing sector, with 10 publishers closed in one fell swoop in 2011 (Parsine, 2011).

In the difficult post-2009 environment, even religious intellectuals were not spared from the paranoia of the government. Leading scholars Abdolkarim Soroush and Mostafa Malekian were accused of attempting to secularise society and promote false mysticism (Fars News, 2010).

At the same time, publishers deemed to be 'pro-revolutionary' were offered extensive state support. In March 2012, the MCIG Cultural Affairs Deputy Bahman Dorri announced that the government had provided a 565,000 USD loan to eighty religious publishers and supported the publication of more than 200 religious titles:

We are hoping that these publishers will publish valuable books with this money, to support the values of the holy regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Bahman Dorri, Cultural Affairs Deputy (in Dolat, 2012)

The Ahmadinejad period was one marked by outright cultural authoritarianism. At the same time as the state took an active role in the promotion of ideologically sound publishers, it encouraged the suppression and large-scale censorship of authors it deemed subversive. The damage wrought upon the publishing sector from 2005-2013 was immense, and it is unclear how long it will take the industry to recover.

Turning a New Leaf? - Rouhani's Uncertain Promise

The departure of Ahmadinejad in 2013 and his replacement by the moderate Hassan Rouhani signalled some positive developments on the subject of cultural censorship. Rouhani's new Cultural Minister Ali Jannati publicly savaged the cultural policies of the Ahmadinejad era, stating in an interview:

If the Qur'an hadn't been sent by God and we had handed it to [the] book censors, they wouldn't have issued permission to publish it and would have argued that some of the words in it are against public virtue.

Ali Jannati, Cultural Minister (in Esfandiari, 2013)

Nonetheless, Jannati maintained that censorship should remain in force, justifying the practice by asking: "How can we allow some problematic books to poison... society?" (Ibid).

A year and a half into Rouhani's presidency, there have been no seismic shifts in censorship policy. Positive developments such as the January 2014 re-licensing of major publishing house Cheshmeh have been isolated events, and the pace of change is sluggish.

Publication license applications continue to pass through the MCIG at a glacial pace and with unpredictable outcomes. Until pre-publication policies are radically adjusted (or abolished altogether), Rouhani's promises for literary freedom will remain unfulfilled.

Hard Times: Getting Published in the Islamic Republic of Iran

The Islamic Republic's publishing process is staggeringly convoluted and unpredictable, and is responsible for provoking a great deal of financial, physical, and mental strain on Iranian authors and publishers.

This segment is a guide through the byzantine structures of the MCIG's censorship and publication system, describing the processes for achieving pre-publication permission.

Death By A Thousand Cuts - Censorship and Pre-Publication Licenses

The fortunes of authors and publishers in the Islamic Republic are largely dependent upon the policies (and idle whims) of the MCIG, which retains responsibility for granting pre-publication permission to Iranian publishers. The unpredictability of the licensing process causes endless heartache for authors, and ultimately serves to drain the vitality of the Iranian literary world.

One of the most significant problems arises from the fact that publishers must expend an enormous amount of time, energy, and money on a book in the pre-publication process without knowing whether or not the MCIG will even grant it a licence. Arash Hejazi describes how publishers have to commission the translation, copy-editing, typesetting, cover design, and proofreading of a book, before submitting it in a final press-quality .pdf to the MCIG's Book Department, where it will be reviewed (Hejazi, 2011).

The MCIG may then request changes, omissions, and re-writes of various segments of the book, which the author and publisher must then re-work, re-proof, and re-format prior to re-submission.

Alternatively, the MCIG's censors may decide that the book's content is simply too controversial, and deny a license outright, meaning that a publisher's investment is wasted. As well as causing nightmares for the publishers and authors who endure this fate, the potential for massive financial loss is forcing publishing houses to be conservative when it comes to signing authors, and investing money in initial manuscripts.

The MCIG undertakes pre-publication censorship on the basis of the guidelines listed in 'The Objectives and Policies and Conditions of Publishing Books'. Introduced under the Khatami administration in 1997, these regulations listed seven topics that would result in a book immediately being denied a publication license. The Ahmadinejad government approved an 2010 amendment that expanded this list to 27 points, forcing a multitude of topics out of the sphere of publically 'permissible' content.

Article 3 of the 1997 document stated that a book would be rejected if it contained material concerning:

1. Propagation and dissemination of atheism (blasphemy) and rejection of the principles of the faith
2. Dissemination of lewdness and ethical corruption
3. Encouraging society to oppose and revolt against the system of the Islamic Republic of Iran
4. Propagation and dissemination of the doctrines of unlawful, armed resistance, and misguided groups and defending the monarchy or dictatorial regimes.
5. Creation of turmoil and conflict amongst ethnic and religious groups,
6. Derision and weakening of national pride and the spirit of "love-for-homeland",

7. Causing a disposition of alienation in favour of Western or Eastern cultures, civilisations, and colonial systems, the propagation of dependence on any world powers, and opposition to the policies and insights seeking to preserve independence. (Mollanazar, 2010)

The 2010 revision was dramatic, and saw Article 3 expanded from 7 to 27 regulations across three themes: 'Religion and Ethics', 'Politics and Society', and 'Rights and Public Culture'. New regulations include:

- A5. Stating details of sexual relationships, sins, and swearing that cause lewdness and ethical corruption.
- A7. Dissemination of pictures that cause lewdness and ethical corruption, such as dancing, drinking and sinful parties.
- B10. The propagation of Zionism and other types of racism.
- C4. Propagation of hopelessness, nihilism, negative perspectives in society, and the promotion of public mistrust.

The guidelines introduced in 2010 are still in force today. Although President Rouhani has made vague promises about cultural liberalisation, the MCIG remains bound to these Ahmadinejad-era censorship guidelines. Unless these guidelines are revised once again, the MCIG's censors will retain the power to block the publication of works deemed contrary to Islamic values.

Have An Affair, But Please Do Not Kiss Your Child - The Erratic Practice of Censorship

The MCIG's censorship processes are often unpredictable, and the guidelines around permissible content are deeply ambiguous. As a result, many authors have endured some truly bizarre acts of censorship.

Small Media spoke with a number of authors and publishers who were willing to share some of their experiences dealing with the MCIG's censors. Many contributors chose to remain anonymous, for their safety, and that of their associates:

Some of the censors ask for the words 'boyfriend' and 'girlfriend' to be removed, while others leave them in.

Mehrshid Motevalli, translator (Nogaam, 2014)

In a play, the husband and wife are arguing while their child is crying in the other room. The father asks the mother go and soothe the child with a kiss. The censors asked for the kiss to be removed!

Anonymous playwright (2014, Interview)

In a story about the love affairs of married couples, containing love triangles and repeated infidelity, not a single word was censored! Despite the subject matter, the book contained no 'sensitive' words and was published without any problems, suggesting that the censorship process has become partly dependent on technology. The censors likely check the digital text against a database of keywords, and if it appears clean, they won't read it.

Anonymous author (2014, Interview)

One book adapted from the Old Testament was asked to remove references to the historical Kingdom of Israel.

Anonymous translator (2014, Interview)

The back-and-forth exchanges between censor and publisher can prove to be exhausting in some cases. During the translation of James Surowiecki's 'The Wisdom of Crowds', censors requested the alteration of the term 'gambling'. The translator subsequently changed the word to 'betting', but was rejected. Although the censors suggested the word 'investing', the translator eventually squeaked past by substituting the word 'playing', instead (Mostafi Rezaei, 2013).

With all this wrangling over textual details, authors sometimes lose their grip on their original work. One diaspora publisher recounted his experience of encouraging Iranian authors to submit their uncensored work to his company, and found that it was often impossible to obtain original manuscripts:

When we founded [publishing house] Naakojaa, we contacted many Iranian writers and told them that we could publish their books, including the censored parts, if they wanted their work to be read free from censorship. But many authors who gave their handwritten manuscripts to their original publishers said that they lacked access to the uncensored original, and that they don't even remember what was in it.

Tinouche Nazmjou, Naakojaa

Despite these complications, diaspora-rooted publishing houses such as Naakojaa are proving increasingly integral to the Persian-language literary world. Their growth, facilitated by global revolutions in communication and e-publishing, has had a significant impact upon the development of Persian literature in Iran, and around the world

Another Country: The Expanding Role of Diaspora Publishers

Owing to the volatile and unpredictable nature of the MCIG's censors, some Iranian authors have turned to publishing houses in the diaspora for support. Free from the obligation to obtain a publishing license, or to have texts vetted by hard-nosed ideologues, these publishers have provided Iranian writers with a means of escaping the tight confines of the domestic market, and connect them with a worldwide readership.

This following section introduces a number of these publishing houses—the big players, upstarts, and innovators—to show the diversity and vibrancy of these companies, and illustrate how they could potentially bring about a revolution in the way Iranian readers engage with literature.

Founding Fathers - Baran

Founded in Stockholm in 1991, *Baran* Publishing is one of the largest Persian-language publishing houses operating in the Iranian diaspora. To date, it has published over 350 books in Persian and translated ten into Swedish. Its stated goal is to provide a voice to censored Iranian authors, and unshackle writers from the limits imposed on them by the government:

From the very first days, our mission was to fight censorship. The censor has been dominant in the cultural atmosphere of our country for years, and has become a part of our lives and our habits.

Baran (2014)

But the priorities of *Baran* have changed subtly over the years. In 2011, *Baran* founder Masoud Mafan said that the publisher's focus had shifted towards providing support to Iranian authors in exile (Mafan, in RASSANEH, 2011).

Baran has so far maintained a traditional approach to publishing, with all books published in physical formats and sold either online, or in specialist bookshops across the globe. In an interview with Small Media, *Baran's* director Masoud Mafan stated that the worldwide presence of the Iranian diaspora has made life difficult for the publisher: the distribution of books to such a disparate community is challenging (Mafan, 2014, Interview).

In order to overcome this issue, the publisher is looking to innovate, with Mafan announcing that his organisation intends to start publishing books in digital formats, as well as in print (Mafan, 2014, Interview).

Owing to its age and its established reputation amongst diaspora publishers, *Baran* has found immense success. Its publications have very long print runs for diaspora books, ranging from between 200 and 2000 copies for first editions. Generally, very few Iranian diaspora publications have print runs exceeding 1000 (Ibid).

Mafan added that diaspora-based publishing provided an opportunity for authors inside and outside Iran to evade not only the MCIG's censors, but it also helps authors to overcome the pervading sense that they must self-censor and limit their writing in order to get their work published.

Building Bridges - Naakojaa

Naakojaa is a Paris-based publishing house founded in February 2012. It publishes Persian-language literature in printed, audio, and e-book formats, and aims to promote the work of young Iranian writers who are unable to advance their careers inside Iran:

Naakoja is faithful to the fundamental principle of freedom to publish, without limitations. The only criteria we use to choose books is their quality...The fame and the work experience of the authors is not the main criteria in choosing and publishing books. Publishing the work of the young and less known authors and translators is one of the important goals of Naakoja.

Tinouche Nazmjou (2014, Interview)

In an interview with *RoozOnline*, *Naakojaa*'s founder Tinouche Nazmjou said that the publisher works to build bridges between the Persian literature produced inside and outside of Iran:

Many Iranians outside the country always had the question of how they can get their desired books, so I thought an online bookstore could be the answer to their needs.

Tinouche Namzjou, (in *RoozOnline*, 2012)

Nazmjou explains that the reason *Naakojaa* publishes books in both electronic and physical formats is to provide different means for its audience to access its publications:

The experience of e-publishing in different countries has shown that it takes some time for people to start reading in this way... Therefore we decided to fulfil the need of the Iranians who haven't adopted this way by publishing physical books.

The Wisdom of Crowds - Nogaam

Nogaam was established in December 2012 and is a London-based independent online publisher for Persian-language literature that is censored in Iran. To date, *Nogaam* has published 21 Persian-language books, and one English-language translation of a short-story collection.

Nogaam operates a unique model. Authors submit their manuscripts for review by an expert board and, if approved, the books become 'projects' on the website. Once this status is achieved, these projects can be 'crowdfunded' by supporters.

These projects receive support from Iranians based in diaspora, as well as inside Iran. If the necessary funds are raised, the books are published under a Creative Commons license. The author receives their fee, and the books are made freely available for download in .pdf and .epub formats.

Nogaam's director Azadeh Iravani told Small Media that the reason the publisher decided to produce books in this way was to bring e-publishing into Persian, and make the books accessible for Iranians all around the world, including in Iran.

There are many publishers outside Iran but they all have or had difficulties delivering the books to their audience. We thought by publishing ebooks we can facilitate the distribution. In other words we can keep the modern Persian literature alive by the use of modern means.

Azadeh Iravani, Nogaam (Interview, 2014)

Iravani is upbeat about the potential of diaspora e-publishing for emancipating Iranian writers from the MCIG's constraints. She says that publishing in diaspora is a liberating experience:

There is no-one you need to answer to. You don't have any barriers for publishing anything, and the publishing house can have its own policies. There is no system in place to limit you, and with the freedom of the internet you are connected to the whole world.

But she also notes that being outside Iran has some disadvantages in terms of conducting business, and reaching a mass audience:

Not all authors and readers are online. It varies from city to city. You might not be able to find a potential reader. At the same time, your relationship with the author is different; you can't have any book launch events, for example, which affects the promotion of the book and limits it to the online world.

Iravani says that her ambition for the future is to publish good books in different formats such as e-books, audio books and printing on demand. She would like to engage with more authors from different age groups, and to encourage older readers to recognise e-publishing as a new way of accessing texts alongside traditional printed books.

Brave New World: The Future of Iranian Publishing

Despite the election of the moderate Hassan Rouhani in 2013, the future of publishing in Iran is uncertain. Hardline conservatives remain entrenched in the political system and look set to replicate the obstructionism they undertook during the Khatami era. At the same time, the MCIG is still lumbered with the narrow rules and restrictions cooked up during the reactionary second term of Ahmadinejad's presidency.

Despite this gloomy picture on the domestic front, Iranian publishers have reasons to feel upbeat about the future of Persian literature. Empowered by the ongoing global revolution in e-publishing, Iranian publishers in the diaspora are giving voice to the silenced authors of Iran, offering them a means to reach international audiences and have their works sent back to readers at home.

The Iranian e-publishing sector is still in its infancy, but has the potential to fundamentally alter the dynamics of Iran's literary culture. More work is needed before this can happen; e-publishing houses require greater levels of investment in order to expand their activities, and more efforts should be undertaken to promote and legitimise their work inside Iran. Nonetheless, technological advancements have unleashed the potential for a literary revolution to take place in the Islamic Republic, one that could break the power of the censors once and for all. ♦

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Small Media

Editors

Bronwen Robertson

James Marchant

Contributors

Kyle Bowen

James Marchant

Research Assistants

Benjamin Graff

Marine Strauss

Raha Zahedpour

Graphic Designers

Isabel Beard

Richard Kahwagi

Arab Media Report

Contributors

Antonello Sacchetti

Valeria Spinelli

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