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Contemporary Trends in Iranian Publishing

Mohammad Ali Sepanlou (Poet and Literary Critic)

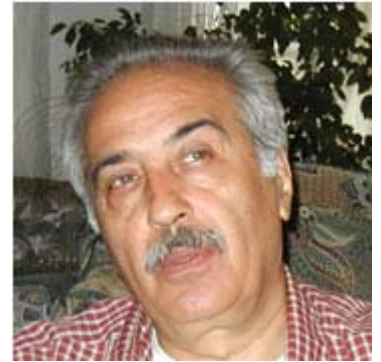
In 1983, in the city of Tehran, I founded a small publishing house. Our first books were modest efforts, and in their modest way, they proved successful. I then decided to turn my attention, as well as the bulk of my capital, to a more ambitious project: a multi-volume collection of articles from the influential Iranian newspaper *Marde Emrouz* (Man of the Day), which had been published from 1942 until 1947.

In its day, *Marde Emrouz* was both popular and controversial. As such, it was a frequent target of Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi's Censorship Authority, a division of the Ministry of Information. Indeed, although *Marde Emrouz* was intended to be a daily paper, during its five years only 138 issues were actually published. In 1947 the editor in chief, Muhammad Masoud, one of Iran's most renowned journalists, was murdered.

At the time, the circumstances surrounding his death were shrouded in mystery. Years later, a clearer picture emerged. A group in Iran's communist Tudeh Party was responsible. Their intent, it seems, was not to silence Masoud. Rather, they had hoped that their own political rivals, members of the royal court and religious leaders, would be blamed for, and thus damaged by, the murder.

Following the overthrow of the Shah in 1979's Islamic Revolution, Iranians showed a great deal of interest in learning more about what had really happened during his regime. *Marde Emrouz* was an excellent source for both news and political analysis of those times. While the Islamic government had its own censorship authority -- without whose approval no book could, or can, legally be published -- criticism of the Shah was hardly the sort of thing they found offensive. The censors approved our reissue of the first volume of *Marde Emrouz* and the first printing sold out in just three months.

But things did not go so well with the second volume. The



Mohammad Ali Sepanlou, a prominent Iranian poet and literary critic, graduated from the faculty of law at Tehran University. He has written 45 books, including 15 collections of his poems. He has translated works by Apollinaire, Sartre and Rimbaud into Farsi. His own poetry has been translated into French, English, German, Italian and Swedish.

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censors denied approval, and the book was held up for a year. This was during the period of the Iran-Iraq war, and the articles in the volume we wished to publish were also written during wartime -- that is, during the Second World War. Some of those articles express criticism of the war, particularly of the Allied occupation of Iran. The censors feared that criticism of war -- even a war fought more than 40 years previously -- could hinder Iran's current war effort. "In this newspaper," they informed me, "there are some articles against war, and such articles weaken the morale of our fighters who are engaged in war with Iraq." In the year that the book was delayed, my company went bankrupt.

I tell this story not because it is unique -- it isn't -- but because it is illustrative of the kind of obstacles, dangers, contradictions and ironies that confront publishers, writers and readers who live under heavy state censorship. In Iran today, despite recent progress toward liberalization, censorship is still a force to contend with and a part of daily life.

But the story points to something else as well, something more positive. Although censorship has been a fact of Iranian life for more than 60 years, we Iranians have maintained our love of written culture. Despite the extremity of our circumstances, we read for pretty much the same reasons that readers around the world do: to better understand ourselves and our world, to satisfy our curiosity, and to be entertained, inspired, instructed and stimulated. Perhaps our experience can demonstrate to others that force and coercion can only suppress, but not extinguish, the love of the written word. And, as we are beginning to see today, that love will in time bring renewal.

The State as Publisher

Like Iran itself, Iranian publishing is complex and continually changing. To understand current trends in Iranian publishing, one needs a certain amount of background knowledge, particularly about the role of the state in the publishing process. Publishers in Iran can be grouped into two categories: governmental and privately run. But these are only broad categories, and the line between them is not always clear.

The blurring of the distinction between the state and the private sector is nothing new. Indeed, under the Shah, it was not uncommon for foundations with close ties to the government to receive substantial state support for large-scale projects. For example, in 1955 the Foundation for Book Translation and Publication was founded, under the leadership of Queen Soraya Esfandiari. The foundation dedicated itself primarily to translating and publishing the Western classics -- Homer, Shakespeare, and so forth. In addition, they published reference books and works on Iranian history and geography. The foundation's purpose was to make available works that, though they might not be profitable, would be cultural assets

for Iranian society.

The foundation continues today, though it has been renamed the Scientific and Cultural Publication Company. Not surprisingly, its emphasis has shifted to Islamic culture and literary works. But despite its longevity, as well as its change in focus, this foundation is of minor significance when compared to the much larger and more influential government-run publishing institutions created since the Islamic Revolution.

Governmental publishing operations have grown considerably since the Revolution. State-run houses often have enormous budgets, which allow them to pursue projects far more ambitious than those possible for private publishers. The Islamic Encyclopedia Foundation, for example, employs scores of translators, writers, researchers and specialists from Iran and elsewhere. In compiling the encyclopedia, they have combed through both Islamic and Western reference works. They have, in addition, written original sections, with special emphasis on the history and key figures in Shia Islam.

Another of the government's sizable publishing projects is compiling a dictionary of Farsi. Responsibility for meeting the operating budget for this publishing program belongs to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The institute charged with compiling this literary dictionary of the Persian language has thus far produced three substantial volumes. The first volume is devoted to Persian literature in Middle Asia; the second focuses on literary terminology; the third examines the Persian literature of Afghanistan. The fourth volume, which deals with contemporary writers and literature, has, "because of certain considerations," not yet been published. One might well guess the editors are fearful of publishing articles about living writers and current issues.

Another literary dictionary, this one of French literature, has been published by Soroush Publishing House, which is connected to Islamic Radio and Television of Iran. Comprising five volumes, this work is a Farsi translation of the *Dictionnaire des oeuvres litteraires*, a kind of bible of French literature. The Farsi version, however, also includes additional sections that examine more fully the works of Iranian writers.

Although reference books are not the only titles published by the government houses, they do get special emphasis. Such works are too costly to be undertaken by the private houses. The government houses, with much larger budgets and much less concern about turning a profit, are thus in a better position to take on such large-scale projects. Although the works published by the government-run houses address pre-Islamic and non-Islamic topics, the emphasis of the government programs is, as one might expect, on Islamic history and literature.

Renewal of Independents

The years following the Revolution brought considerable hardship to independent publishers. Many were shut down or confiscated by the new regime. Amir Kabir, for example, was the largest and most active Iranian publishing house, but it was confiscated in 1980, because its owner, Ali Jafari, was accused of being a supporter of the Shah. Ironically, Amir Kabir was the country's foremost publisher of leftist books -- not exactly the Shah's favorite sort of literature.

Publishing in Iran was hit hard by the economic crisis caused by the eight years of war with Iraq, from 1980 to 1988. The printing industry disappeared almost entirely, as printing plants were destroyed by Iraqi bombing, and the financial demands of the war made the building of new plants an impossibility. High inflation caused the price of doing business to soar, while government censorship increased. As a result, many publishers just closed shop.

But with the end of the war in 1988, things began to look up. The government decided, as part of the reconstruction effort, to help revive Iranian publishing. This entailed increasing production in the government sector and also giving financial support to the private sector. Independent publishers were helped in ways that included loans, paper rations, and opportunities to lease or purchase printing equipment at below-market prices. Unfortunately, the extension of assistance was often arbitrary or based on ideological grounds.

The 1997 election of Muhammad Khatami to the presidency both expressed and lent greater weight to the movement of Iranian society toward liberalization. Although Khatami's program of reforms has met with the staunch opposition of conservative clerics, who still exercise control over most of the nation's most powerful institutions, he enjoys tremendous popular support. While progress has often been slow, it is unmistakable. And one area of change is in the publication and sale of books.

During Khatami's presidency, the extension of government assistance to independent publishers has become less tied to ideological concerns. While publications that reflect the perspective of Islamic conservatives still receive their accustomed support, that support now extends as well to books written from a very different point of view. In addition to loans, reduced paper prices, and other such means of government assistance, the Ministry of Culture buys 200 to 700 copies of the first edition of most books. This last point is especially beneficial to small publishers and to writers with a limited audience.

The Ministry of Culture has certainly not relinquished its control of the publishing business. It continues to censor works it

deems immoral, and it maintains its mandate to issue and revoke the permits required for publication of all titles. Nevertheless, the last 10 years has seen a marked increase in the sales of independently published books. According to *Ketab-e Hafteh* (Book of the Week), a weekly published by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the titles most in demand are those concerning recent Iranian history and politics.

The two best-selling independent titles in recent years, for example, have been the Farsi translation of William Shawcross's *The Shah's Last Ride: The Fate of an Ally*, which was first published in the United States in 1988, and Abdollah Shahbazi's *Zohur va soghut-e saltanat-e Pahlavi* (The Rise and Decline of the Pahlavi Monarchy). In the last two or three years, both these titles have sold in the area of 150,000 copies. (In Iran, the average number of copies sold is about 3,000; any title with sales exceeding 30,000 is considered a bestseller.) Abbas

Milani, a professor of political science at an American university, is the author of another popular book, *The Persian Sphinx*, which tells the story of Amir Abbas Hoveyda, the prime minister of Iran on the eve of the Revolution. The popularity of these and other related titles demonstrates the desire of Iranian readers to better understand the causes of their own revolution. Indeed, these titles are greeted with such eagerness that more than a few of dubious reliability have done quite well. For example, the sentimental *Dokhtaram Farah* (My Daughter Farah), reputedly by the mother of the former queen, has been reprinted seven times in just the last few months.

What Readers Are Reading

Interest in politics is not confined to the years surrounding the Revolution. Books written by supporters of President Khatami's reform program have recorded substantial sales, and this despite the threat of censorship or persecution of their authors. One such book, *Alijenab-e Sorkhpoush va Alijenaban-e Khakestari* (Red Robed Eminence and Gray Eminencies), a book that addresses the "chain murders" of writers and intellectuals, has sold about 100,000 copies. The book's author, Akbar Ganji, is now imprisoned; he has served three years of a ten-year sentence. [Editor's note: For a description of the phenomenon of chain murders see Azar Mahloujian's article in our Online Symposium, "Phoenix from the Ashes: A Tale of the Book in Iran."]

Politics and history are not, of course, the only topics of interest to Iranian readers. In Iran, as in the U.S., Japan or Europe, readers love an absorbing novel, whether it is by an Iranian or a foreign writer. In the latter category, our tastes -- again, like readers elsewhere -- run the gamut from the popular bestsellers of Danielle Steele and John Grisham to the classic works of Tolstoy, Faulkner and Flaubert. With a few exceptions, Iranian novelists are little known outside their native land. But in Iran, the books of such writers as Ahmad Mahmud, Mahmud

Dowlatabadi and Simin Daneshvar have substantial readerships. In the first three months following publication, Daneshvar's *Sarban-e Sargardan* (The Wandering Camel Driver) had an impressive 80,000 copies in print. Still, strictly in terms of popular appeal, serious fiction cannot match light literature. In contemporary Iran's book market, Harry Potter is champion.

(It should be pointed out that Iran does not comply with international copyright agreements. It is a matter for the translator or publisher of a work to decide whether he or she will contact a foreign author to obtain permission and negotiate payment. Thus, a popular foreign title might appear in several Iranian editions. Also, like any other book published in Iran, foreign titles are subject to review by the censorship authority. So, for example, passages depicting sex are almost invariably deleted, either by the state authorities or by the translators themselves, who know that such passages will not go unnoticed.)

Persian literature comprises one of the world's oldest and richest poetic traditions. Today that tradition is being carried on by such Iranian poets as Ahmad Shamlou, Forugh Farrokhzad and Sohrab Sepehri. It is not unusual for volumes by these and other prominent poets to go through multiple printings and to record sales in the hundreds of thousands. In addition, their works often appear in translation in foreign editions. Ahmad Shamlou's work has been especially successful at achieving international recognition, and he has several times been named as a candidate for the Nobel Prize for literature. Our affection for poetry is not confined to the work of Iranian poets. Pablo Neruda, Nazim Hikmet, Garcia Lorca and Jannis Ritsos are just a few of the foreign poets whose works have found an appreciative and substantial audience.

While books on recent Iranian politics and history along with technical and reference works have a wide audience, the same cannot be said for some of the other nonfiction genres, such as travel writing, self-help, memoirs or personal essays. One notable exception, however, is instructional books on foreign languages. As to why this is, one can only guess. Could it be that knowledge of another language would be of use to one wishing to emigrate?

According to official statistics, books on religion constitute the single largest classification of books published. But even if the figures are reliable, they may be a bit misleading. One should keep in mind that most titles in this category are published at government expense and distributed free of charge to libraries and other institutions. They also benefit from free advertisement on radio, television and other media close to the government. The numbers do not, therefore, reflect the actual demands of the market.

As in other countries, children's books are a distinct area of

publishing. And, again, as in other countries, they are very popular in Iran. Indeed, with the exception of religion, more titles are published in the category of children's literature than any other single genre.

Any account of contemporary Iranian publishing is incomplete unless it includes at least a mention of the market for photocopied books, or samizdat as they are called in Russian. Many books that have been censored, in part or in full, by the government are available in complete form as photocopied volumes. The body of such censored literature comprises Iranian writings from antiquity up to the present day. It also includes work by expatriate and foreign authors. As an example of the latter, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's masterpiece *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is available in both the official censored edition and in the complete samizdat translation. It is ironic that in the bookshops of Tehran the latter version is the one most readily available.

(Translated from the Farsi by Azar Mahloujian)

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