

Writer's Block

THE STORY OF CENSORSHIP IN IRAN

A Small Media Publication



TABLE OF CONTENTS

3 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

5 INTRODUCTION

- 6 Shelf Life
- 9 Into the Archives

10 CHAPTER I: Epic Literature

- 11 Rewriting History
- 12 Penning a Future
- 13 A Modern Epic
- 20 Presidential Libraries
- 22 Conclusion

23 CHAPTER II: Bad Language

- 24 Another Country
- 27 Redacting Nations
- 29 The Second Sex
- 31 Queer Tales
- 32 Conclusion

33 CHAPTER III: A Sick Industry

- 34 The Wealth of Nations
- 37 The Fall
- 38 The Gift
- 41 Success Stories
- 42 The Art of Ketabsazi
- 43 The Road Less Travelled
- 45 Turning the Page?
- 46 Conclusion

47 CHAPTER IV: Brave New World

- 48 A Global Revolution?

52 CONCLUSION

54 GOT AN IDEA?

55 BIBLIOGRAPHY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



In 2011, Small Media published a report assessing the state of Iran's cultural landscape. Set against the backdrop of President Ahmadinejad's second term in office—which saw tight controls over literature, music, film, and the arts—it made for dispiriting reading. Culture in Iran was facing a state of emergency.

Hassan Rouhani was elected in 2013 on the promise that he would allow Iran's cultural scene the space to flourish, free from the worst excesses of censorship that defined the Ahmadinejad administration. This report checks in on the government's progress part-way through his first term, assesses his progress so far, and compares his record against that of his predecessors.

Our conversations with writers, publishers and book distributors based in Iran and the diaspora, and our analysis of the comprehensive publication data registered with Iran's 'Book House' have suggested that there are some reasons to feel cautiously optimistic about the future direction of cultural policy in the Islamic Republic.

However, the continuation of censorship policies, state hostility to minority literature, endemic corruption, and economic uncertainty are still

considerable obstacles to the development of a healthy publishing sector. The reality remains that many publishers and writers still view the diaspora as richer ground for creative freedom and commercial success.

One of the reasons the diaspora publishing environment looks so attractive is due to its high rate of technological innovation and eagerness to engage with e-publishing. This report discusses the potential of this 'digital revolution' to transform the publishing landscape in Iran, while identifying a number of remaining obstacles to further development.

We believe that this report serves as a useful map to the major issues facing Iranian writers and publishers, the slow growth of opportunities afforded to them, and highlights a number of potential avenues for further research and analysis.

Iran is a country brimming with articulate, imaginative, and bold creativity—it is immensely important that this talent is not squandered, and we hope that publishers, civil society and governments find this report of use as they work to support the reflourishing of Iran's literary world.

James Marchant

Research Manager, Small Media

May 6, 2015

*From Alexander, to Tamerlane,
to Hezbollah, they burn our books, destroy
our libraries, censor our language, and
rewrite our history.*

But we see another pattern as well.

*After each defeat, our culture regathers its
strength and revives its creativity, like a
phoenix arising from the ashes.*

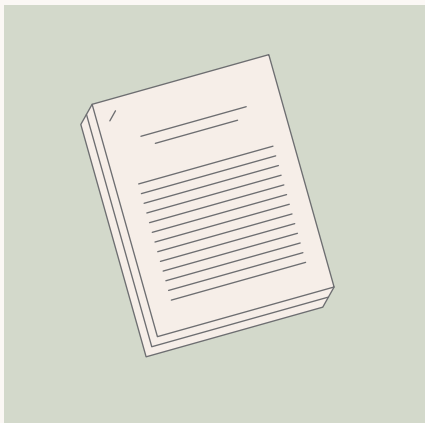
Azar Mahloujian

*Phoenix From the Ashes: A Tale of the
Book in Iran*

SHELF LIFE, FROM THE BRAIN TO THE BOOKSHELF

A book's journey from messy, marked-up manuscript to glossy-covered tome is a treacherous one, with a vast bureaucratic minefield to traverse, publishers to entice, and censors to evade.

Here's an example of a fairly typical journey undertaken by a young novelist working in Iran today. Our novelist is fictional, but her story is very much grounded in reality—rooted in the experiences of writers we've interviewed, and who have spoken publicly about their struggles.

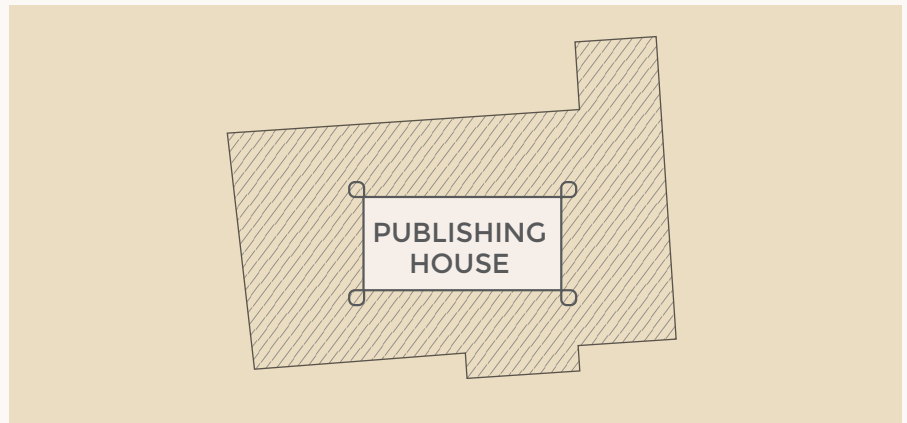


STAGE ONE, THE BOOK

This is Zohreh's story. She's just finished writing a novel.

350 pages long. Two and a half years in the making. A modern classic (even if she does say so herself).

Time for her to find a publisher. Surely they'll be knocking down the door to snap up a book this groundbreaking!



STAGE TWO, FINDING A PUBLISHER

She finds one. But they're not interested. Zohreh's book is a little too risqué—they don't want to pour their money into it as they're not sure it'll get past the censors at the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG).

So, she finds another publisher. This one is a bit more daring. They're willing to invest money into editing, proofing, typesetting and designing the book - expensive processes that need to be

completed before Zohreh's novel can take the next step towards publication.

Before sending her manuscript off to the censors at the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG)—the people who have the final say as to whether or not her book will be published—she'll need to fill out these forms. They'll help the censors decide whether her book is worthy of their scrutiny, or should just be rejected outright.

TESTIMONIALS

ON RED LINES:

Several poet friends of mine told me that a publisher suggested that they make some changes in the wording of their poems before sending them off to the MCIG.

Any words or sections that—according to the advisor of this publishing house—crossed ‘red lines’ or broke taboos were replaced with more neutral words. This transformation of the publisher into a tool of censorship is very painful.

Sepideh Jodeyri
Poet (2015, interview)

ON EDITORS:

Iran's editorial sector is very weak. Publishers tend to either accept books, or reject them outright. They don't edit them at all. When a book goes unedited, it's like the author is the sovereign. In Europe, editors have power. In Iran, writers have power.

Also, writers often don't listen to their editors. There are often bad vibes between them. As a result, there's no content editing in Iran. Editors are only there to correct punctuation. No-one is there to help writers to improve their stories, and even if there was, no-one is willing to listen.

Mohammad Tolouei
Writer (2015, interview)

ON PUBLISHERS:

In the last couple of years [the censors] have become smarter: they put pressure on the publishers not to send any books with “issues”... I spent 5 years writing a novel, and no publisher is willing to send it to the MCIG. In my opinion this is the worst thing that could happen.

Previously, the writer and the publisher were on the same side, and the MCIG was on the other side. The writer and the publisher used to work together to bypass censorship, but now the publisher and the MCIG are on the same team, and the writer is on their own.

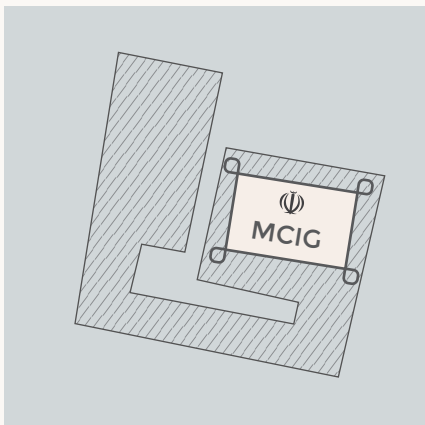
Mahsa Mohebbali
Writer (2015, interview)



The censors gave you a list of paragraphs or chapters to remove. [Under Ahmadinejad] you were not asked to explain them, and you couldn't deny that there was anything wrong with them. They were like bullies: they had the power, and forced you to accept it.

Afshin Shahne Tabar

Director, Candle and Fog Publishing
(2015, interview)



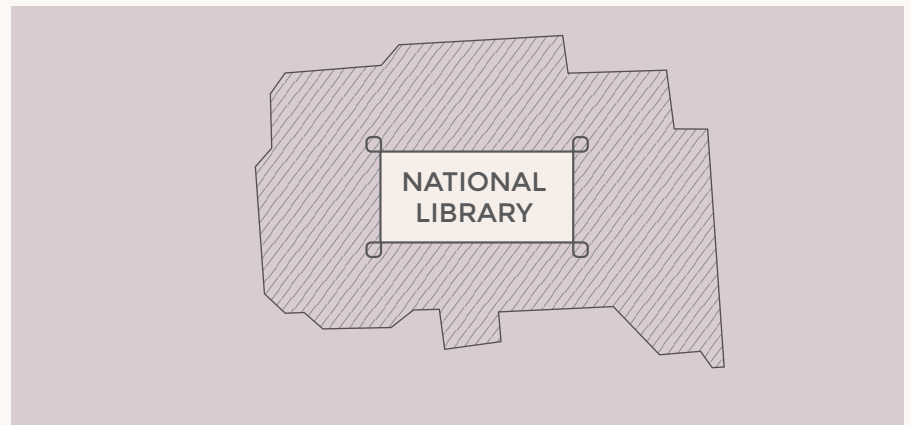
STAGE THREE, THE MINISTRY OF CULTURE AND ISLAMIC GUIDANCE

It's time for Zohreh and her publisher to send off the printed manuscript, a .pdf version of the book, and all the completed forms. Fingers crossed!

...Keep them crossed!...

...There's still hope!...

...Eight months have passed, but it was worth the wait! Zohreh's book hasn't been rejected outright. But the MCIG has helpfully suggested



a few 'corrections' to comply with their publishing rules. Once she's removed pages 212-272, changed 'wine' to 'water', and re-written that philandering drunk as a devoted husband, then they'll be positively ecstatic to grant her book a license.

Simple, right? She'd best make those changes quickly, and re-submit it.

...It could be another long wait.

STAGE FOUR, GETTING PUBLISHED

Zohreh made it! Everything gets sent back to her publisher, and they can warm up the printing presses.

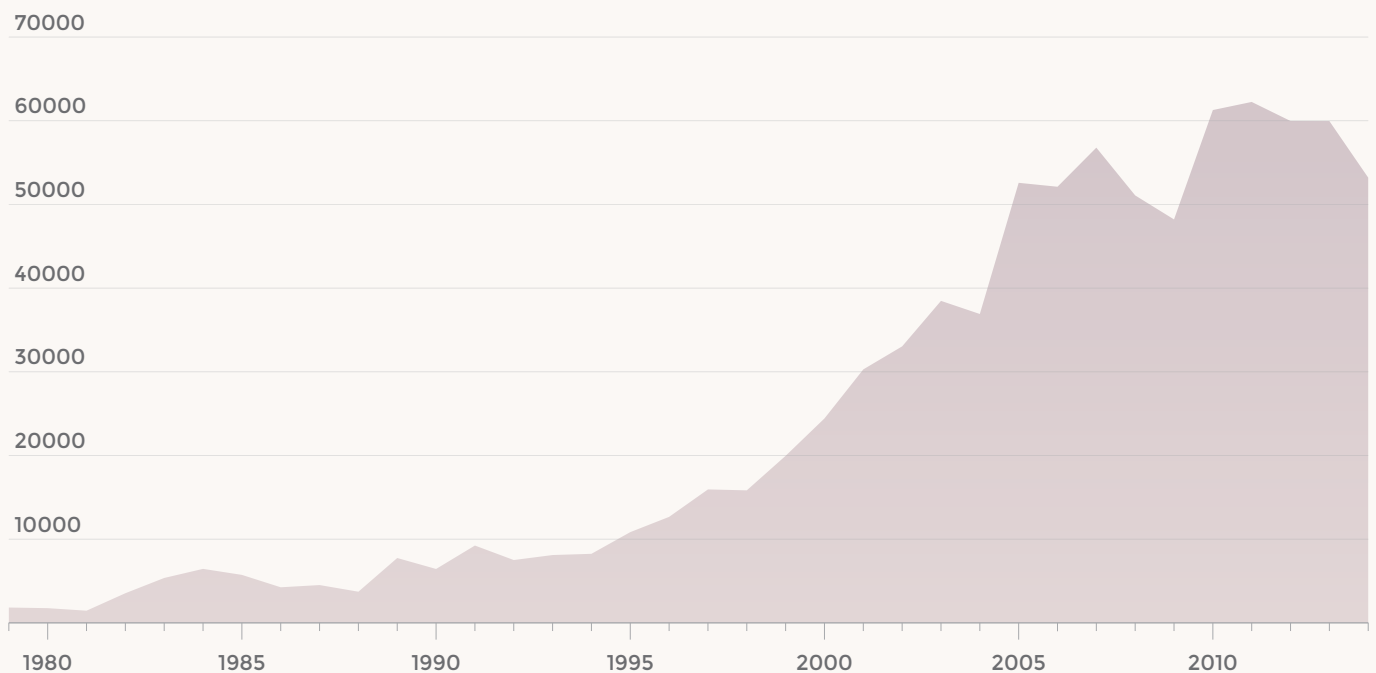
It's been a long time coming. Several thousand copies of Zohreh's book are sent off to distributors.

And a copy is sent off to sit on the shelves of the National Library, which is then logged with the Iranian Book House as a published title.

INTO THE ARCHIVES, THE NATIONAL LIBRARY DATABASE



Unique Titles Published in Iran



The Iran Book House (*ketab.ir*) maintains a database of all the published books that get sent to the National Library.

It's a big database; 881,729 titles big, to be precise.

As far as we can tell, no-one's ever really taken a proper look at all this data before.

So rather than letting it gather dust on the shelves, Small Media has hoovered it all up and combed through it in forensic detail. We've pieced together the story of publishing in Iran since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and uncovered loads of really interesting trends that can tell us about the past and future of publishing in Iran.

The graph above shows how many books were published each year since 1979. Right away, we can see a few

trouble spots—the 1980s was a period of stagnation and decline in the publishing sector. In contrast, the period between 1997-2005 was a boom period, though this was followed by a sharp bust.

Tumultuous, eh? In Iran, the management of the publishing sector is a political football, with innumerable clerics and politicians working to impose their own ideologies on publishers and writers. As we'll demonstrate, changes in governments, regulations, and censorship practices can have a dramatic effect on the state of the publishing industry.

This hasn't just been the case for the last few decades. Those at the top have been trying to control the written word in Iran for centuries. Let's rewind, and take a look at the complex history of Iranian literature, before assessing the legacy of the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

REWRITING HISTORY, PRE-MODERN LITERARY CONTROL

The destruction of libraries is an unfortunate but frequent occurrence in Iran's history.

Azar Mahloujian
(2002: 3)

The Arab Conquest of the mid-600s may have ushered in something of a renaissance in science, medicine, history and theology in Iran, but for around 200 years following the invasion, this rich literature was written solely in Arabic—the new language of court (Riazi, 2005: 103).

Over the next few centuries, a vast number of Zoroastrian holy texts were put to the torch as Islamic authorities sought to consolidate their hold on the country (Mahloujian, 2002: 4). Although spoken widely, Persian was essentially wiped from the written record until its rebirth in the poetry of Ferdowsi, Rudaki and Daqiqi in the 900s.

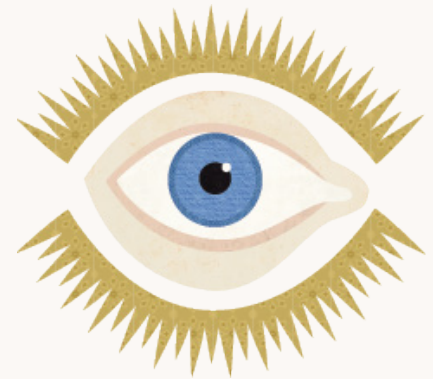
Further traumas and waves of religious persecution resulted in the destruction of thousands more Persian-language texts in the early modern era, and the rewriting of history for political ends.

In the 1500s, when Shah Isma'il I oversaw the conversion of Iran to Shi'ism, many Sunni religious scholars were exiled or killed (Ward, 44) and the new Safavid dynasty started to patronise historians and Shi'a scholars to legitimise their rule (Marcinkowski, 2012: 173-5).

Later, in the 19th century, the Babi religious movement called for the destruction of non-Babi texts, at the same time as their own faith was suppressed violently and comprehensively by the Qajar authorities (MacEoin, 1983: 230, 233).

These instances of literary control were generally rather crude, and manifested themselves most frequently in the form of raging bonfires. Modern censorship is a far more sophisticated and nuanced affair, and for all it lacks in book burnings, it more than makes up for with suffocating layers of insidious bureaucracy.

PENNING A FUTURE, STATE LITERATURE IN THE PAHLAVI ERA



The modern story of literary censorship begins with the rise of Reza Shah and the Pahlavi dynasty. In 1923 Reza Khan overthrew the decrepit Qajar dynasty and began the work of building a modern state. For Reza Shah, this entailed the total reordering of Iranian society, and the inculcation of ‘modern’ nationalist values in the populace.

One of the main vehicles for the state’s push towards a state-conceived sense of ‘modernity’ was sweeping education reform. Following the government’s closure of private schools in October 1930 (*Banani, 1961: 97*), Iranian children were taught from state-approved textbooks focusing on pre-Islamic history, Iranian geography, and values of ‘national unity’ (*Ansari, 2003: 62*).

One of Reza Shah’s first acts as monarch was to transfer the powers of the Ministry of Education’s censorship office to the National Police (*Soleimani: 184-186*). Then, in 1938, the government transferred further powers to the Office of Guidance in Writing, which worked alongside the newly-founded Office of Public Enlightenment to control dissenting publications and promote books and intellectual activities that supported state ideology (*Ibid: 191*).

Reza Shah’s son and successor Mohammad Reza Shah ramped up state control even further. In 1941 the ‘Office of Book Writing’ was established under the Ministry of Culture. This office was responsible for screening all books prior to publication. It judged around 20,000 titles over its lifetime, rejecting over 2,000 of them outright, and suggesting amendments to around 5,000 more. (*Mollanazar, 2010: 168*)

Although the Office of Book Writing was responsible for pre-publication censorship right up until the 1979 Revolution, it wasn’t the only organisation putting fear into writers. The Shah’s intelligence agency SAVAK also monitored writers (communists and Islamists were amongst its favourite targets), and locked up a number of high-profile authors (*Sandler, 1986*).

Then came the 1979 Iranian Revolution, also known as the Islamic Revolution.

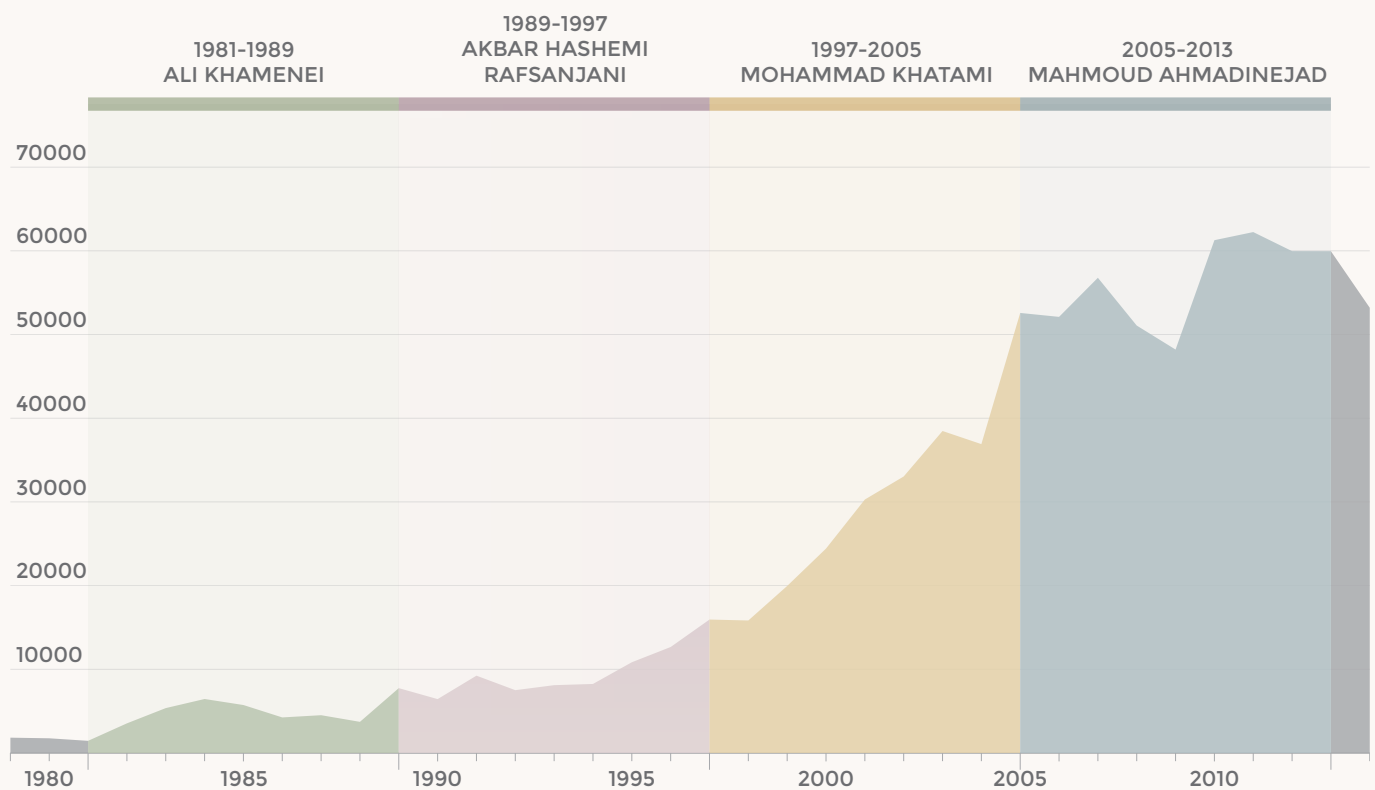
Shortly after Ayatollah Khomeini assumed leadership in Iran, SAVAK was closed down, and the ‘Office of Book Writing’ was dissolved. (*Axworthy, 2008: 270*) For a short time, at least.

But the more things change, the more they stay the same...

A MODERN EPIC, THE STORY OF IRANIAN LITERATURE 1979-2014



Unique Titles Published per Term



The 1981 election of Ali Khamenei brought political stability to Iran—a stability maintained by mass executions, widespread terror, and tight state control over all aspects of society.

In his inaugural address, Khamenei vowed to eradicate “deviation, liberalism, and American-influenced leftists” (*New York Times*, 1981). An all-out assault on the literature of these imagined enemies was a driving force in wartime cultural policy. In 1981 the Islamic Republic revived the old Pahlavi censorship apparatus, and passed its powers to the newly-formed Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG).

Censorship was back, and in a big way. Azar Mahloujian described the suffocating atmosphere of desperation and fear:

Iran’s war with Iraq, from 1980 to 1988, had a catastrophic impact on Iran’s literary life. Censorship hardened, and almost any word or deed could easily be interpreted as treacherous. Publishers and writers were punished for any books judged critical of the government’s policies. Because of the lack of foreign currency and the trade blockade imposed by many countries, paper was rationed (2002: 12)

This dark period wouldn’t last forever. The end of the 1980s saw sweeping changes in Iranian politics and

I was working there. Hashemi [Rafsanjani] oversaw one of the best periods after the Revolution. But after hardliners put pressure on Khatami, he was forced to resign as minister. Even after that—when the new minister was Ali Larijani—the Head of the Book Office was Ahmad Masjed-Jamei, who is the most significant figure in book publishing after the Revolution.

Jamei tried to maintain some open space around book publishing. It was only under Ahmadinejad that everything changed—he replaced all the MCIG's directors, personnel and practices with his own.

Ali Asghar Ramezanzadeh

*former Deputy Minister of Cultural Affairs,
2000-2003 (Interview, 2015)*

society. The war ended in 1988, Supreme Leader Khomeini died in 1989, and the moderate Hashemi Rafsanjani was elected to the presidency in the same year.

Rafsanjani was no radical. With post-war economic recovery at the top of his agenda, he left his liberal Cultural Minister—future president Mohammad Khatami—to manage publishing policy. Khatami offered up a progressive conception of the Revolution's cultural values, proposing that “freedom of thought and respect for intellectual honour are among the primary goals of the Revolution” (*Moslem*, 2002: 171).

Even after Khatami was forced out of his job by hardliners in 1992, the MCIG's Book Office was overseen by Ahmad Masjed-Jamei, a reformist who advocated for freedom of publishing under Rafsanjani, and who would go on to serve as a stridently liberal Cultural Minister under President Khatami (*Samii*, 2002).

Despite Rafsanjani's subsequent appointment of several conservative Cultural Ministers (including Mostafa Mir-Salim and Ali Larijani) our data suggests that the number of titles printed in Iran continued to grow throughout Rafsanjani's presidency—evidence perhaps of Jamei's influence.

Our data suggests that there was broad continuity between the Rafsanjani and Khatami governments. The transition from the Rafsanjani period to the Khatami period appears fairly smooth. There are no real signs of disruption in the growth of the publishing sector.

Under Khatami, more titles were being published than ever before, and the growth rate in the sector continued to grow over the course of Khatami's presidency despite the challenges and criticisms piled upon his administration by the reactionary right (*Ashraf and Banuazizi*, 2001, 251).

TESTIMONIALS

ON KHATAMI:

Khatami's time was great, there is no doubt. Mr. Mohajerani was the minister—he was extremely well-educated, open, and intellectual, and many good things happened during his time in Khatami's first term.

Mahsa Mohebbali

Writer (Interview, 2015)

ON LIBERTY:

Khatami's first term was the least challenging, when Khosrow Taleb-Zadeh was in charge of the Book Office in the MCIG. His presence in the cultural arena was a great phenomenon in the post-Revolution period.

If my memory serves me right, he once told the newspaper Yas that since he didn't believe in cultural censorship, his approach consisted of publishing any and every book, and letting people decide for themselves what they'd like to read.

This approach deserves much respect, and to me it's an approach absolutely unique amongst all the periods of the Islamic Republic.

Sepideh Jodeyri

Poet (Interview, 2015)

ON SMART CENSORS:

In my opinion, censorship was looser in Ahmadinejad's time, because his censors didn't know books at all. They just didn't understand what to do. In Khatami and Rouhani's time, censors are people who know their books.

The worst thing is a smart censor. He'll censor things that even the author himself was not aware of. In fanatical regimes, they hire idiots. They only understand swearing and cursing. If you use metaphors, they'll never pick up on them, and will allow your books to pass through.

Mohammad Tolouei, author (Interview, 2015)

Mohammad Tolouei

Author (Interview, 2015)



During Ahmadinejad's presidency a new office was set up behind the Book Office, supported by the Ministry of Intelligence. It was informal, but was effectively responsible for deciding whether a book could be published, or a publisher banned, such as in the case of [banned publisher] Nashr-e Cheshmeh. The main change that Ahmadinejad made to the Book Office was this effective transferral of executive powers from the MCIG's Book Office to the Ministry of Intelligence.

One member of this new office was [Alireza] Barazesh—a member of the Ministry of Intelligence in the years following the Revolution. He was in charge of interrogating writers and intellectuals who were arrested by the Intelligence Ministry. Ahmadinejad put this man in charge of the Book Office and he brought in some of his friends who were working—formally or informally—with the Ministry of Intelligence.

During this period there first appeared a list of publishers and writers who were denied the right to publish anything—my name was on it! Around 400 writers were on the list, which allowed for any of their publications to be banned, in violation of Iranian law.

Ali Asghar Ramezanzpour

*former Deputy Minister of Cultural Affairs, 2000-2003
(Interview, 2015)*

For all its flaws, the system under Khatami allowed the publishing sector to grow significantly. Censors still guarded the state's 'red lines', but more works were published than ever before, and the MCIG usually attempted to engage positively with authors and publishers, working with them to resolve issues rather than rejecting manuscripts outright.

The flatline in published works from 2005-2009 marks the arrival of an entirely different system.

In 2005, Ahmadinejad brought in Hossein Saffar-Harandi as Cultural Minister. This was a disaster for

Iran's writers. He revoked many of the licenses granted under Khatami, forcing publishers to apply again through the MCIG's new censors (*Atwood, 2012*).

Then, a shadowy committee stacked with former members of Iran's Intelligence Ministry was established 'behind' the MCIG's Book Office. It was during this time that the MCIG started to compile a 'blacklist' of authors who would be denied publishing permission automatically, without their books undergoing inspection from censors.

The period was marked by massively expanded state

TESTIMONIALS

ON DESPAIR:

Censorship became so harsh that many novels got rejected without any opportunity for corrections. Even worse, these outright rejections were announced two or three years after sending a book to the MCIG. It was unbearable for young writers, and many gave up writing altogether.

Anita Yarmohammadi

Writer (Interview, 2015)

ON CRACKDOWNS:

The events of 2009 had a dramatic effect on publishing—there was a huge step back. Many poets and writers gave up all hope that their books would be published. I remember that some publishers were forbidden from publishing anything. Even the café bookshop and publishing house Sales was closed for a long time, since the authorities were afraid that poets and writers would gather there.

Sepideh Jodeyri

Poet (Interview, 2015)

ON CORRUPTION:

All of the statistics [in the Book House] increased because of the process of ketabsazi—or ‘making books’. The MCIG, in order to increase the statistics in the database, allowed some university articles—often false or plagiarised, and written by students for academic purposes—to be published and included in the Book House database as proper books.

During the Ahmadinejad era, the MCIG increased this kind of ketabsazi a lot, because they needed to increase the number of printed books in the database, and because there’s a sort of industry behind it involving the government’s interests.

Ali Asghar Ramezanpour

Former Deputy Minister of Cultural Affairs,
2000-2003 (Interview, 2015)



The MCIG is an arm of the government, and the government is a part of the regime—a regime that believes in censorship and depends on it for survival. So changing the president—or any other middle manager—will never change a thing.

Payam Feili

Writer

(Interview, 2015)

oversight of the publishing sector, and a desire to tightly control the boundaries of social and political debate. This got worse after the 2009 post-election protests.

The data we have obtained from the Book House may significantly understate the negative impact of the Ahmadinejad administration upon the publishing industry. The sharp rise in publication figures from 2009-2010 contradicts the picture painted by all of the individuals we spoke to over the course of this study, who described this period as one of the most difficult in Iran's post-revolutionary history.

The continuing rise in our data could be legitimate, but it appears far more likely to be the result of governmental ketabsazi—or 'book-making'. MCIG authorities were able to boost their publication statistics quite easily, and many publishing houses were more than happy to support them, as we'll explain in Chapter III.

It's still too early to pass any judgements on the Rouhani administration's record.

We're only half-way through the president's first term, and the data from the past two years isn't substantial enough to make any rock-solid claims about the future health of the publishing industry.

The statistics actually show a fairly steep decline from

2013-14, during the transitional phase between the Ahmadinejad and Rouhani administrations. But all we've heard from commentators so far suggests that things are getting better. We hypothesise that this post-2013 collapse actually signifies the decline of Ahmadinejad-era 'ketabsazi' practices; the Book House is likely presenting a more accurate picture of the publishing sector than it has for many years.

Reports indicate that the MCIG is acting more quickly under Rouhani, processing books within a month, providing feedback to publishers, and communicating in an open manner. It appears that state interference in publishing has retreated somewhat, and writers are expressing hope that these might be the early days of a new period of liberalism.

But Rouhani hasn't quite lived up to all of his early promises. His Cultural Minister Ali Jannati suggested that pre-publication censorship might end. It hasn't. High-profile authors like Mahmoud Dowlatbadi still see their work banned from publication, and the 'blacklist' appears to still be in operation.

There's still a lot of progress to be made. But this data shows that a change in administration can have some impact on the shape of the publishing landscape, even if the principles of censorship and state oversight remain facts of life in the Islamic Republic.

TESTIMONIALS

ON HOPE:

I am completely optimistic. I think space has opened up since Rouhani came into office, and he's kept his pledge for 'hope and wisdom'.

We can't ignore the new life that's been breathed into young authors. In 2014 many books were published that had been stuck in the MCIG for months. This has caused an outpouring of passion and happiness. It really motivates you to produce new work, because you can once again feel hope that your work will reach an audience.

Anita Yarmohammadi
Writer (Interview, 2015)

ON RUBBISH:

Ahmadinejad's time was terrible... and so far in Rouhani's time in office, things appear better on the surface. No books were granted permission for eight years—now they give permission to some of them, and you think "Wow! So many books are getting permission under Rouhani!" But there are still many that don't get licenses. You don't see the freedom that existed in Khatami's time, at all.

I am very pessimistic. It looks like things are getting better and more books are published, but whatever you read is rubbish... the serious literature—the literature that is criticising the government, criticising society, and challenging society—is still not getting published.

Mahsa Mohebbali
Poet (Interview, 2015)

ON CHANGE:

Three major changes have taken place under Rouhani so far:

- 1. The directors and censors have been replaced. The new administration has changed the Book Office's director and the rest of the team, so now they've got a much better relationship with publishers.*
- 2. The informal Intelligence Ministry group working behind the Book Office has gone.*
- 3. The MCIG has stopped piling so much pressure on publishers to publish specific books that are of interest to the government.*

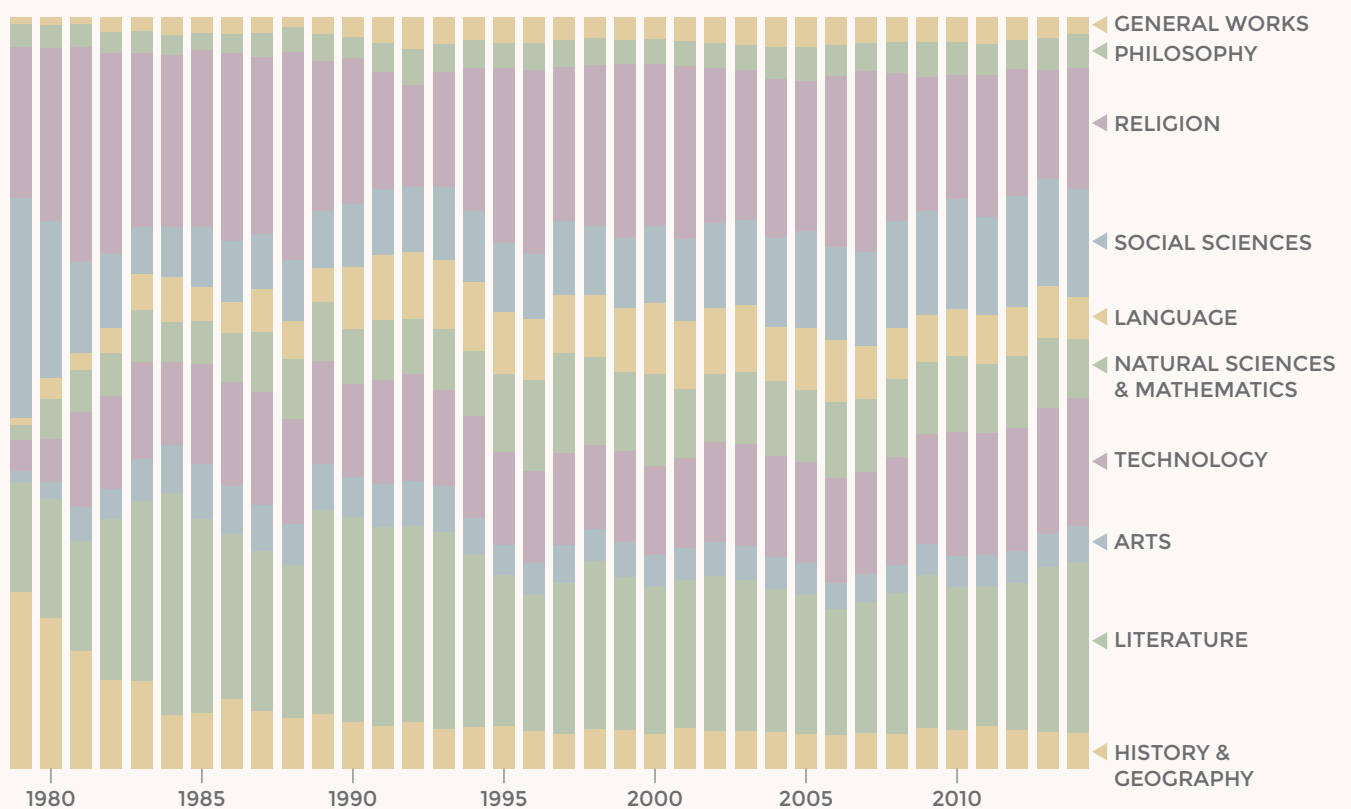
Ali Asghar Ramezanzpour
Former Deputy Minister of Cultural Affairs,
2000-2003 (Interview, 2015)



PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARIES, GENRES PUBLISHED 1979–PRESENT



Book Genres Published in Iran, 2014–1979



Just as the changing political situation has an effect on the number of books published each year, there's also a lot of variance in the types of books published during each administration. The output of the publishing sector was very different during the war than it was under Khatami, just as the Rafsanjani-era literary landscape was a world apart from Ahmadinejad's Iran.

One thing hasn't changed so much—religious books have been published in very high quantities since 1979. These include Qur'ans, collections of hadiths, and the theological works from across the Islamic world. Although a vast array of religious titles are printed each year—between 14.5% (2013) and 24.1% (2007) of the published total—it's not at all clear how many

Literature is the only other genre to be published in quantities comparable to religious works.

actually get read; many books are bought up by the government, and distributed to mosques, seminaries, and libraries across the country, rather than making their way to public bookshops (see Chapter III).

Literature (that is, fiction) is the only other genre to be published in quantities comparable to religious works, having hovered at around 20% of the published total since the mid-1990s. As works of fiction are most vulnerable to state censorship, literature is a good barometer of the intensity of book censorship in Iran.

Literature reached a low point under Ahmadinejad,

when in 2006 only 16.7% of newly printed titles were works of literature. By contrast, 2014 saw the largest literary haul since Khatami came to office—22.7% of newly published books were works of literature. A single year's data is not enough to project a trend, but the 2014 data is nonetheless a hopeful first sign that the Rouhani administration may be rolling back the worst excesses of literary censorship seen under Ahmadinejad.

There are lots of other stories to see in our data set. Visit the corresponding chapter in the [online version of Writer's Block](#) to explore this data set for yourself.

CONCLUSION

Iran's publishing sector has experienced a number of shocks over the years as different administrations have attempted to impose their own values and ideological vision upon the sector, using the apparatus of the MCIG to control the free flow of literature available to the Iranian population.

The data from Iran's Book House demonstrates the rapidity with which the publishing sector expanded during the Rafsanjani and Khatami periods, and corroborates the testimony provided by experts and witnesses we spoke to during our research.

The Ahmadinejad-era data presents a more muddled picture. Our discussions with publishers and writers active during this period have suggested that the industry was in a nosedive, but our data indicates stagnation, and even moderate growth. We don't think this is an earth-shattering discovery of the Ahmadinejad government's secret cultural liberalism; we believe that it is more likely to be a demonstration of its tendencies towards corruption, and barefaced lies on the matter.

ANOTHER COUNTRY, AN OVERVIEW OF ETHNIC MINORITY PUBLISHING IN IRAN

Iran is a land rich in cultural and linguistic diversity. Although Persian is Iran's official language, and is spoken by a majority of the population, a vast number of minority languages and dialects are scattered across the Iranian Plateau.

In theory, the Constitution officially recognises the existence of minority languages, and grants them a number of rights in education, press, and the media.

ARTICLE 15

The official language and script of Iran, the lingua franca of its people, is Persian. Official documents, correspondence, and texts, as well as text-books, must be in this language and script. However, the use of regional and tribal languages in the press and mass media, as well as for teaching of their literature in schools, is allowed in addition to Persian.

ARTICLE 19

All people of Iran, whatever the ethnic group or tribe to which they belong, enjoy equal rights; and color, race, language, and the like, do not bestow any privilege. (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1989)

In reality, these guarantees ring hollow.

Up to 10 million Azeri Turkish-speakers live in Iran's East and West Azerbaijan provinces, but there has

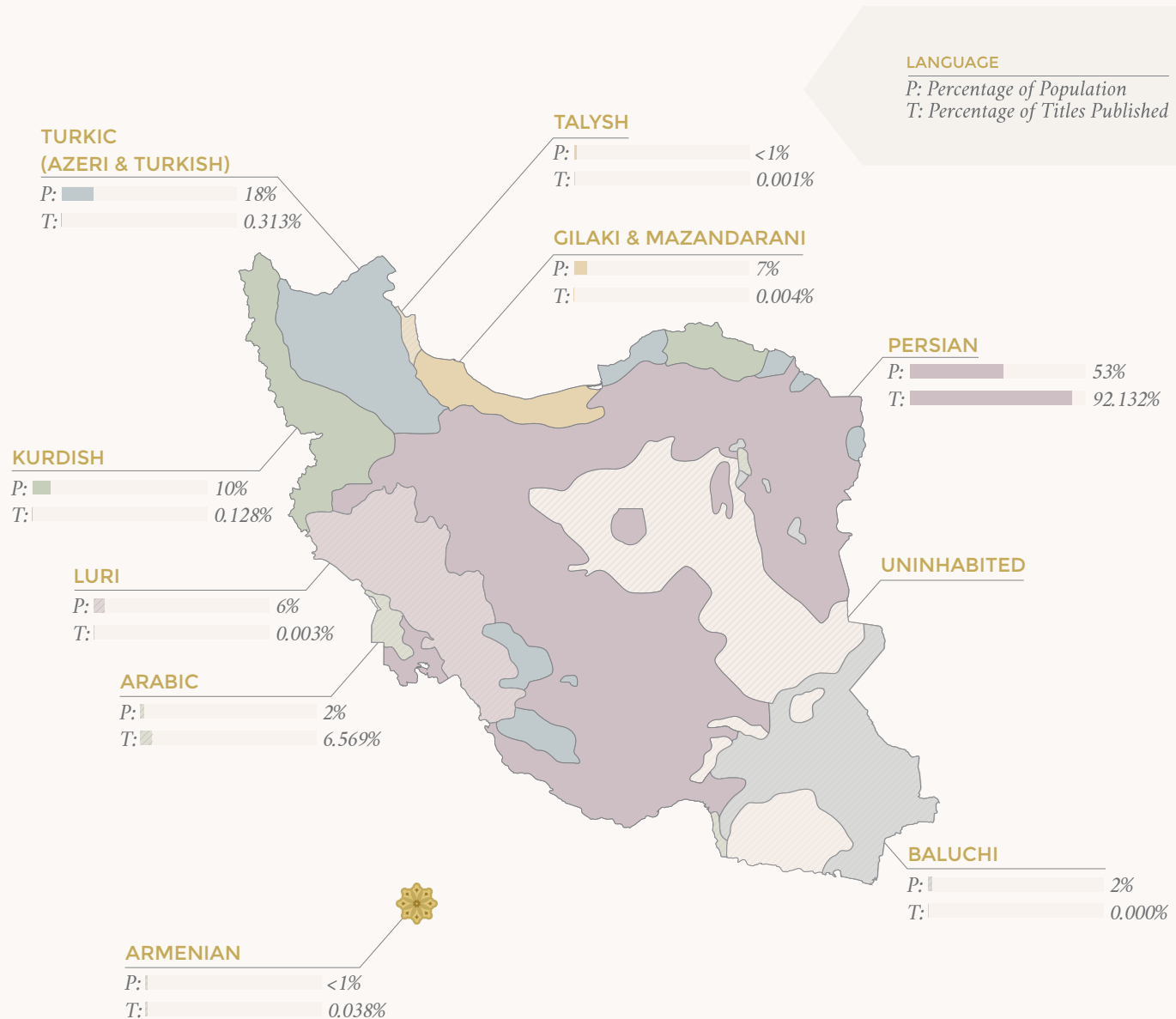
been no official Turkish-language instruction in Iranian Azerbaijani schools for more than 90 years (Djavadi, 2010).

Kurdish, a language spoken by around 8 million people in Iranian Kurdistan, Kermanshah, and West Azerbaijan provinces, has been consistently excluded from school curriculums, with only a limited number of university courses covering Kurdish language and literature (Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre, 2012 and Haqiqi, 2013). Although Kurds comprise roughly 10% of Iran's population, the Book House data suggests that only 0.13% of all books published since the Revolution have been in the Kurdish language.

Baluchi, the language of around 2 million (largely Sunni) Iranians in Sistan and Baluchestan province, is entirely unrecognised at all levels, and has never been used as a language of instruction in Baluchi-majority schools. The lack of state support has left Baluchi-language education and literary production in a state of crisis, with only a small circle of local intelligentsia working to publish Baluchi literature on a small-scale (Dashtyari 2003). The lack of Baluchi-language books in the database would indicate that all such publishing activities are undertaken surreptitiously. Rouhani's government has so far announced no moves towards recognition of the Baluch minority.



Titles published per language, 2014-1979



Note: Armenian-speakers aren't a majority anywhere in Iran, with communities concentrated in Tehran and Isfahan.

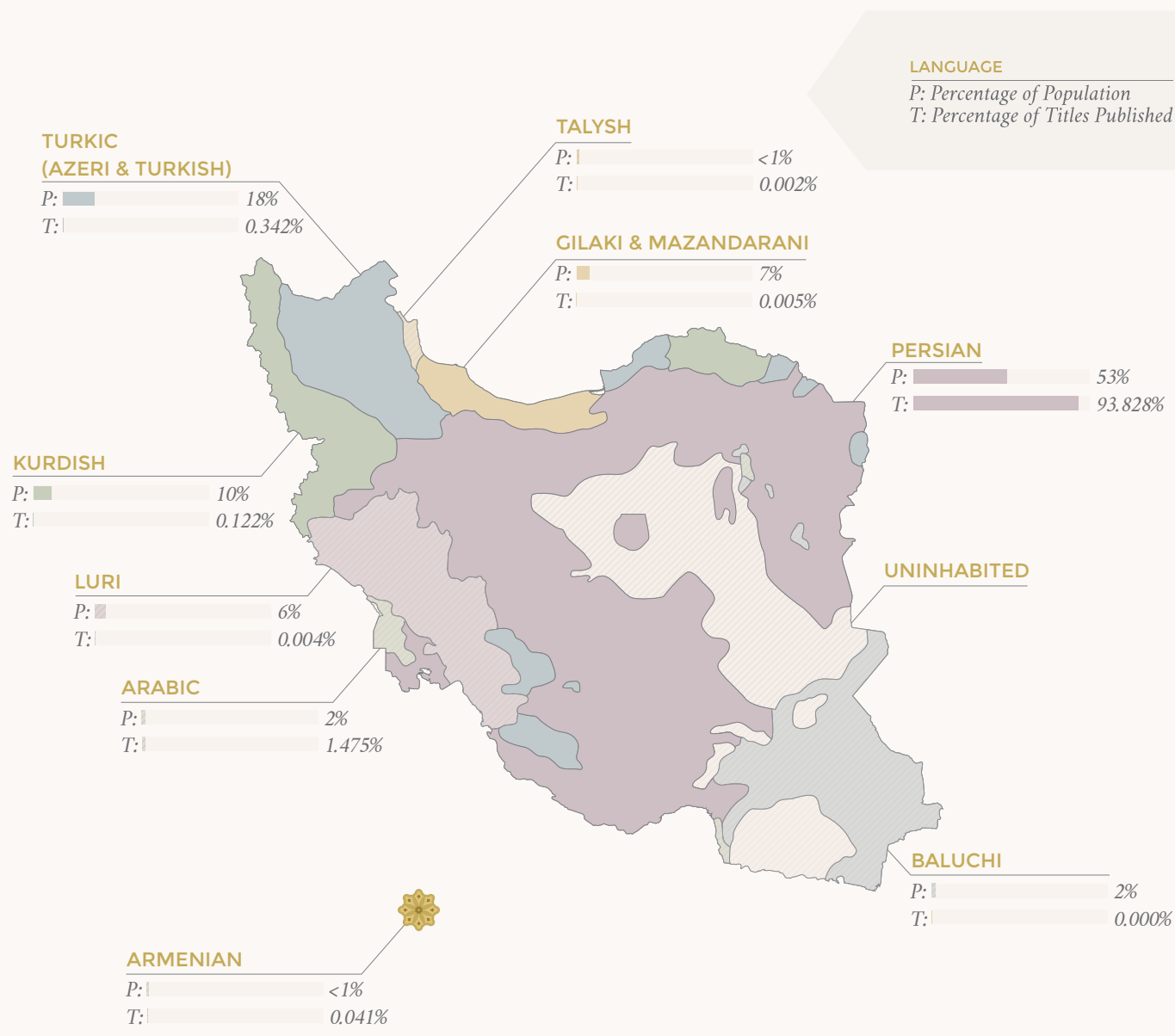
These inequalities in Iranian society and the education system are just as deeply entrenched in the publishing industry. Authors frequently have trouble getting their works into the National Library if they're written in the 'wrong' language.

The map above displays the major linguistic groups of Iran, the size of each community, and the number of titles printed in each language since the Revolution.

You might have noticed that one minority language fared better than all the others: Arabic. Although Arabs are estimated to make up 1.5% of Iran's population, our data shows that around 6.6% of books published in Iran are written in Arabic.

As the language of the Qur'an, Arabic has a privileged position. The special position of the Arabic language is even enshrined in the Iranian constitution:

Titles published per language (excluding Religion)



ARTICLE 16
Since the language of the Qur'an and Islamic texts and teachings is Arabic, and since Persian literature is thoroughly permeated by this language, it must be taught after elementary level, in all classes of secondary school and in all areas of study. (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1989)

The books printed in Arabic are largely religious in nature—they include Qur'ans, hadiths, and

philosophical texts. Once these are accounted for, the number of educational texts and works of literature written in Arabic is slightly below-average considering the estimated size of the community—1.5%. All the same, Arabic-language books fare much better than the other minority groups we've mentioned, indicating that existing constitutional protections, and mandatory Arabic lessons in schools are supporting the existence of a small Arabic publishing sector.

REDACTING NATIONS, LINGUISTIC DISCRIMINATION IN PRACTICE

So why do Iran's minority communities have so much trouble getting published? Ideologically, the Islamic Republic says it respects all languages and ethnic groups, but Persian chauvinism is deeply ingrained into the Iranian publishing system, nonetheless.

Speaking at the United Nations in 2014, the Iranian Azerbaijani publisher Sharife Jafari described the particular hardships she faced as her publishing house Pinar attempted to publish Azeri Turkish-language works in 2006, in the wake of Azeri protests against racist cartoons (Collins, 2006):

We were a dim ray of hope for Turkish writers in Zanzan province. We prepared books [for publication] with hardly any resources, and released a couple of Turkish poetry collections. At the same time, the newspaper 'Iran' published an offensive cartoon about Turks, leading to massive protests in Tehran and Turkish-speaking regions, with Zanzan amongst them.

From that day on, our life became a living hell. My office was invaded constantly for inspections, although all the while I was publishing books according to the MCIG's guidelines. (AllHumanRightsIran Südwind, 2014)

Ms. Jafari went on to outline nine significant issues faced by Turkish-language publishers, all of which work together to cripple the minority publishing sector:

- *A Turkish-language book will take significantly longer to be processed by the MCIG than a Persian-language book.*
- *The written style of books is affected. Turkish words must be written with a Persian pronunciation.*
- *Authors are forced to avoid naming Azerbaijani national heroes, or praising their actions.*
- *The MCIG doesn't purchase Turkish books unless they are strictly in line with the regime's policies.*
- *The government creates political problems and fraudulent documents that hinder and exhaust Turkish-language publishers.*
- *Publishing licenses are rarely granted to Azeri applicants. There are a few Turkish-language publishers but they can't solely publish Turkish books—they need to publish a majority of Persian books to stay in business.*
- *Turkish publishers receive irrelevant warnings and court orders from the intelligence services and other state authorities, and are monitored and harassed by intelligence services at major book fairs.*
- *Turkish-language publishers are prevented from participating in book fairs in Turkish-majority cities like Ardabil and Urmia.*
- *As a result, there is no real market for Turkish books, and no unions have been set up for them. Azerbaijani publishers always suffer from unspoken financial problems. (Ibid)*

When I was in charge as Deputy Minister of Culture, we used to allow the publication of books in different languages - Kurdish, Turkish, Baluchi - we didn't have any problems with Iranian minority languages back then. It was the period with the fewest problems there had ever been. But under Ahmadinejad, any minority language publications were banned and publishers were required to send their books to Tehran. The Ministry of Culture, in violation of the law, didn't allow the publication of books in any other Iranian languages but Persian.

Ali Asghar Ramezanzpour

former Deputy Minister of Cultural Affairs, 2000-2003

(Interview, 2015)

Ali Asghar Ramezanzpour—Deputy Cultural Minister during the Khatami period—argues that things were not always this way, stating that it is unfair to compare the policies of the Khatami and Ahmadinejad periods:

When I was in charge as Deputy Minister of Culture, we used to allow the publication of books in different languages - Kurdish, Turkish, Baluchi - we didn't have any problems with Iranian minority languages back then. It was the period with the fewest problems there had ever been. But under Ahmadinejad, any minority language publications were banned and publishers were required to send their books to Tehran. The Ministry of Culture, in violation of the law, didn't allow the publication of books in any other Iranian languages but Persian. (Interview, 2015)

Whereas regional MCIG offices were permitted to process publication applications under Khatami, Ahmadinejad's government ordered all books to be sent to Tehran. Fewer censors were familiar with minority languages, and so couldn't vet the texts sent to them. Compounded by uncoded policies against minority languages, the number of non-Persian publications declined.

Ramezanzpour added that there are some indications that the Rouhani administration may be starting to work to reverse the Persian chauvinist policies of the Ahmadinejad government:

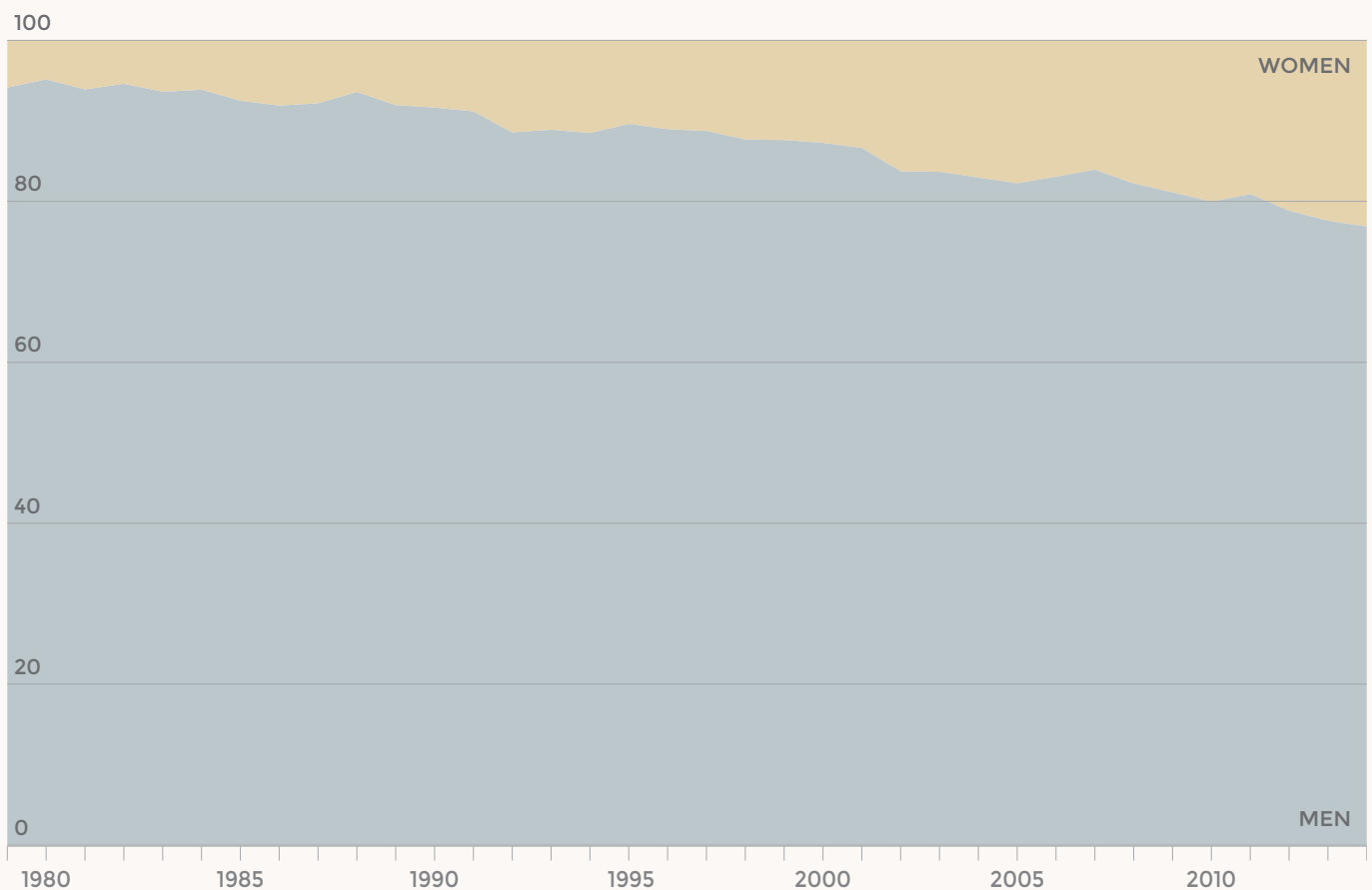
Recently I've heard that the new administration is talking about allowing publishers in Kurdistan and Azerbaijan to publish books in their own languages, but I can't confirm this. (Interview, 2015)

These reports have been backed up by the January 2015 declaration of Ali Younesi, the Minister for Ethnic and Religious Minorities, that the government is working to support the teaching of minority languages in schools using minority language textbooks (*Radio Zamaneh*, 2015).

On April 15 2015, it was confirmed that Kurdish teachers in the city of Saghez had started to teach Kurdish literature in schools using Ministry of Education-approved Kurdish-language textbooks, suggesting that Kurdish-language publishing may be on the rise (*Ghoreishi*, 2015).

THE SECOND SEX, WOMEN'S VOICES IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

Published Authors by Gender



So, whereabouts have women been most active? Let's take a look at the breakdown of male and female writers' output, by genre.

Women are most prolific in the sphere of literature; it is in this field that they comprise the greatest proportion of active authors.

The proportion of women that have published works in the fields of technology and natural sciences is fairly

similar to that of men. This shouldn't come as too much of a surprise: around 70% of Iran's engineering students are women, and female representation in the sciences in Iran is excellent.

The least women-friendly genre is religion. Women face numerous obstacles in climbing the ranks of the clergy, and make up just a small contingent of the seminaries in Qom and Mashhad. As a result, male writers are responsible for much of Iran's religious output.

WOMEN - TOP DEWEY CODES (#)

1. Iranian and Farsi fiction (15,357)
2. Iranian and Farsi poetry (11,335)
3. Islam, Bábism & Bahá'í Faith (6,548)
4. Standard English usage (5,750)
5. Primary education (4,328)

Women writers' high level of engagement with poetry and prose is frustrated by the special forms of scrutiny their works are subject to. Sepideh Jodeyri spoke with Small Media about the particular 'red lines' that female writers are unable to cross in their writing:

As a female poet, if I use the word "body" in my poems, usually it gets censored. This is because the regime believes that it's indecent for a woman to speak about her body, or her beloved's body, or the body in general. But in the case of male poets, this kind of redaction is less common.

Basically, both society and the state are patriarchal and sexist, and any woman who wants to use the language of the female body and spirit in her works has no space in this society. A female author in such a society should only write under the lines of male language and patriarchal thought, otherwise she'll be repressed and censored. (Interview, 2015)

Anita Yarmohammadi, a young Tehran-based writer, echoes Jodeyri's comments, stating that women writers are given less space to craft complex, or 'unethical' characters, or question traditional constructions of morality:

A male writer's characters can be bold and daring, they can fall in love, smoke, swear and cheat. But if a woman writer mentions one of those things, it means outright rejection. It's a catastrophe.

MEN - TOP DEWEY CODES (#)

1. Islam, Bábism & Bahá'í faith (137,560)
2. Iranian and Farsi Poetry (40,336)
3. Iranian and Farsi Fiction (25,592)
4. Iran (22,469)
5. Mathematics (14,888)

This is a point where we and censors have a difference of opinion. [Writers believe] that even from the most unethical adventures, you can craft the greatest ethical lessons. Where on Earth can you find spouses that don't think about cheating? If anyone says they exist, I say they're lying. It's all of these internal struggles and challenges that give real meaning and value to people's commitments. (Interview, 2015)

Misogyny is also a massive hurdle for female managers in publishing houses. Sharife Jafari—manager of the Azerbaijani publisher Pinar—spoke in 2014 about her ordeal negotiating with administrators in the Tabriz branch of the MCIG.

In Tabriz I was made to wander from pillar to post. They insulted me because I was a woman. There were times that [officials] said to me: "Why do you do it? [Your job] isn't a woman's job. A woman should be at home serving her husband." They wanted to break me and wear me down. (AllHumanRightsIran, 2015)

Women remain a minority within the Iranian publishing sector. They're underrepresented at all levels, face heightened scrutiny, and are frequently pilloried by the right-wing press when they do manage to achieve success.

Progress is being made, but far too slowly. There's a great deal left to accomplish.

QUEER TALES, LGBT WRITERS IN IRAN

Sepideh Jodeyri recklessly seeks the body in her poetry... In interviews about her collection, Jodeyri spoke specifically in defense of homosexuals, and she even declared that if she was accused of being homosexual she wouldn't be concerned, because homosexuality is not a crime for her!

Martyr Avini Cultural Institute
(2015)

Any texts that discuss homosexuality or queer themes will fast-track a manuscript to the shredder room, and grant the author a place on the MCIG's 'blacklist'.

Payam Feilli is an openly-gay 25 year old author from Tehran. His high-profile efforts to get his works published outside Iran were met with explicit threats to his life. As a result, Payam has been forced into exile in Turkey. He spoke to us about the impossibility of getting published as a gay author in Iran:

There is absolutely no possibility for sexual minorities in Iran to express their literature. It never even crossed my mind to send my book—with a homosexual narrator—to the MCIG to see whether they'd accept it or not.

From the early stages of writing [my] book, I was thinking of finding a publisher outside Iran... There is a publisher in Canada called Gilgameshan that I published two of my books with. They try to publish Persian literature from sexual minorities. It's a small publisher, and not widely known, so the response would be limited... Under repression and constant threats, nothing can be created.

My own literature is divided between general literature and minority-specific literature and I haven't heard or seen other groups or organisation to do the same for minority literature or any media to promote it. (Interview, 2015)

Publishing works outside Iran was enough to earn Payam a spot on the MCIG's fabled 'blacklist'. Although

the MCIG denies the existence of the blacklist, it was a censorship tool that saw frequent use during the Ahmadinejad era.

Everything stopped after publishing a book in Berlin. The publisher told us himself that with my name, I wouldn't be granted any book licenses ever again. So, the MCIG minister smiles and says 'We don't censor authors,' but in reality they are doing it. They censored me, and censored my identity. Because I myself was banned, my other works couldn't get published—works that'd definitely be approved if they were submitted under a different name.

I sent my book to the publisher in the last week of Khatami's government, and it took 10-11 months to receive the license. It was published but in the beginning of Ahmadinejad's time, the license was revoked. (Ibid)

Heterosexual writers are not immune from the effects of state-sponsored homophobia, either. Sepideh Jodeyri wrote a Persian-language (and Paris-published) translation of the LGBT-themed graphic novel *Blue is the Warmest Colour*. The reaction from the right-wing press was vitriolic, and infused with crude homophobia:

Sepideh Jodeyri recklessly seeks the body in her poetry... In interviews about her collection, Jodeyri spoke specifically in defense of homosexuals, and she even declared that if she was accused of being homosexual she wouldn't be concerned, because homosexuality is not a crime for her!
Martyr Avini Cultural Institute (2015)

CONCLUSION

As we've seen, it's very easy to be a target of the MCIG censors before you've even written anything controversial.

If you submit something in a language other than Persian, the censors may not bother to read it.

If you're a woman, you'll still struggle to break through in a male-dominated publishing sector in which women only write 20% of published books.

And if you're an out-and-proud member of Iran's LGBT community, you're probably out of luck. If you're known to the authorities, you're likely to already be on the MCIG's blacklist.

THE WEALTH OF NATIONS, PAPER SUBSIDIES, SANCTIONS, AND THE STATE

The Iranian publishing industry is a sick industry.

Afshin Shahne Tabar

Director, Candle and Fog Publishing
(Interview, 2015)

Publishing is a costly business. There are salaries to pay, and expensive equipment to maintain, but there's also one incredibly fundamental ingredient in the printing process that costs publishers a fortune: paper.

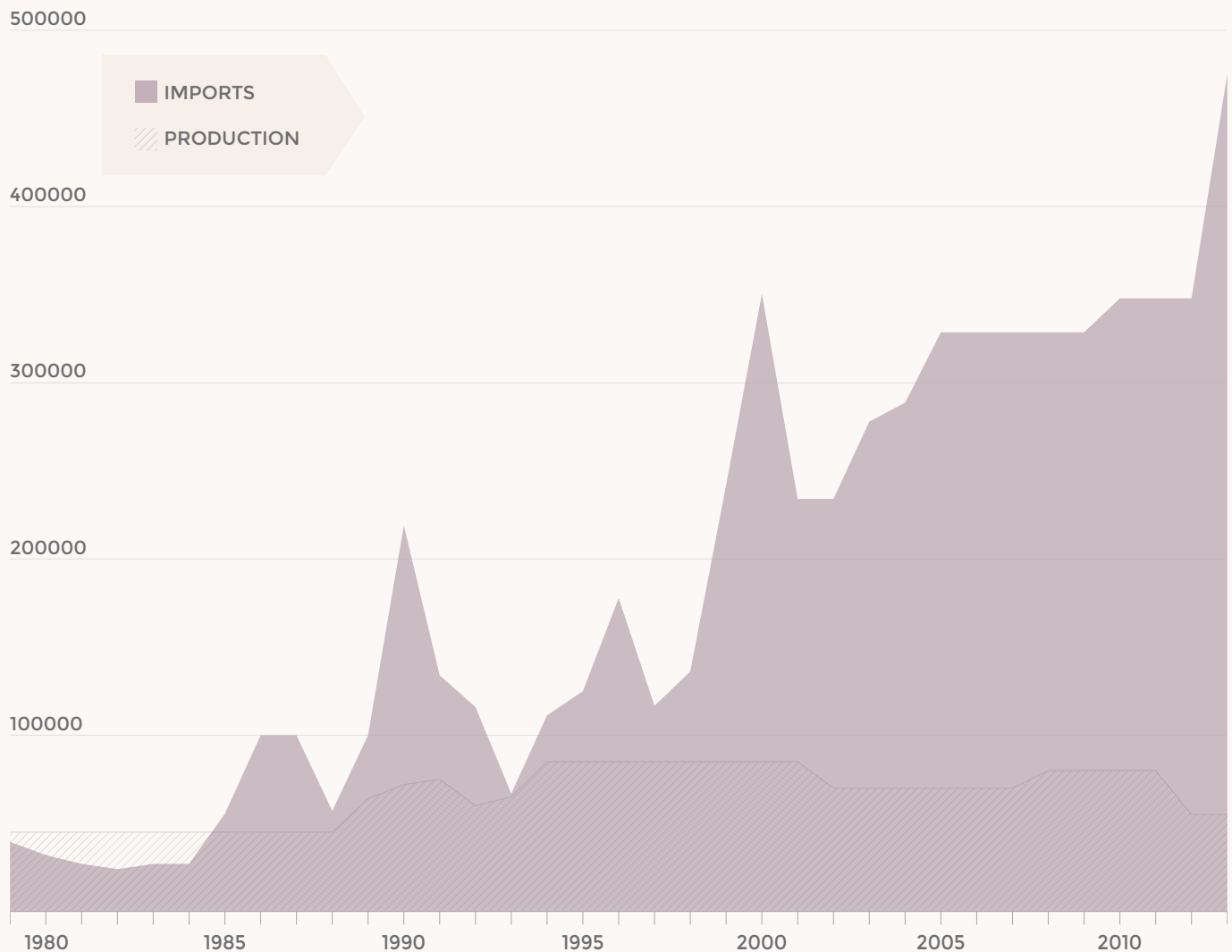
In modern times Iran has always imported more paper than it has produced, leaving it vulnerable to sharp changes in global paper prices. The issues caused by Iran's dependence on global markets have been exacerbated further by the volatility of the Iranian rial in the post-2006 era of international sanctions.

Ida Mirzaei explains how economic chaos, combined with the government's retreat from subsidising policies have left the paper and publishing industries facing a crisis.

When the value of a country's currency decreases unexpectedly, the production sector of the economy has to endure higher prices of imported inputs and higher costs of production. While many companies in developed countries use the hedging instruments available in the market to plan against such risk, many companies in developing countries lack access to such instruments since the financial market has not matured in their home country and their access to global financial markets is somehow limited. In such circumstances companies rely on government subsidies – either a direct production subsidy or a guaranteed exchange rate – against other major currencies in the world.

This is exactly the case of Iranian paper and publishing industries. But what happens when the state revokes also the government subsidies which companies are relying on?

Paper Production vs. Imports



Until 2006, the government sheltered publishers from the worst fluctuations of the market, offering significant subsidies to publishers to help cover the cost of paper imports. But it was very easy to game this system—publishers often exaggerated the number of books they printed in order to get extra subsidies from the MCIG, to the point that even voices inside the publishing industry were calling for a review of the system during the mid-2000s.

So helpfully, the Ahmadinejad government reformed the system. By abolishing paper subsidies entirely.

The impact was moderate, at first. Mehrdad Damghanian, the director of Akhtaran Bookstore, described the situation in a 2014 interview:

At the beginning, the elimination of paper subsidies didn't affect publishers economically, because the subsidised paper supplied by the MCIG was 6,000 tomans per bundle, as opposed to 7,000 or 8,000 tomans in the free market... The problem started when the price of paper tripled due to economic crises and the price of paper went up to 60,000 tomans and more.

Although global paper pulp prices would soar between 2006-2009, the massive spike in paper prices can be largely attributed to the crippling sanctions imposed on Iran since 2006, and the collapse in the value of the Iranian rial.

Importing paper from abroad became exorbitant, and the cost of printing skyrocketed. Book prices rose moderately, and demand collapsed.

TESTIMONIALS

ON SHOPPING BASKETS:

As a result of economic problems and inflation, books were the first products to be eliminated from the family shopping basket. Although I don't think that books in Iran are that expensive compared to other products, spending 15,000-20,000 tomans on a 500-page book is still difficult for Iranians. It's a market where there's no demand, and all these factors are at play causing the Iranian publishing industry to stagnate.

Ahmad Tahavori
Qoqnoos Publishers
(Interview, 2015)

ON LUXURY:

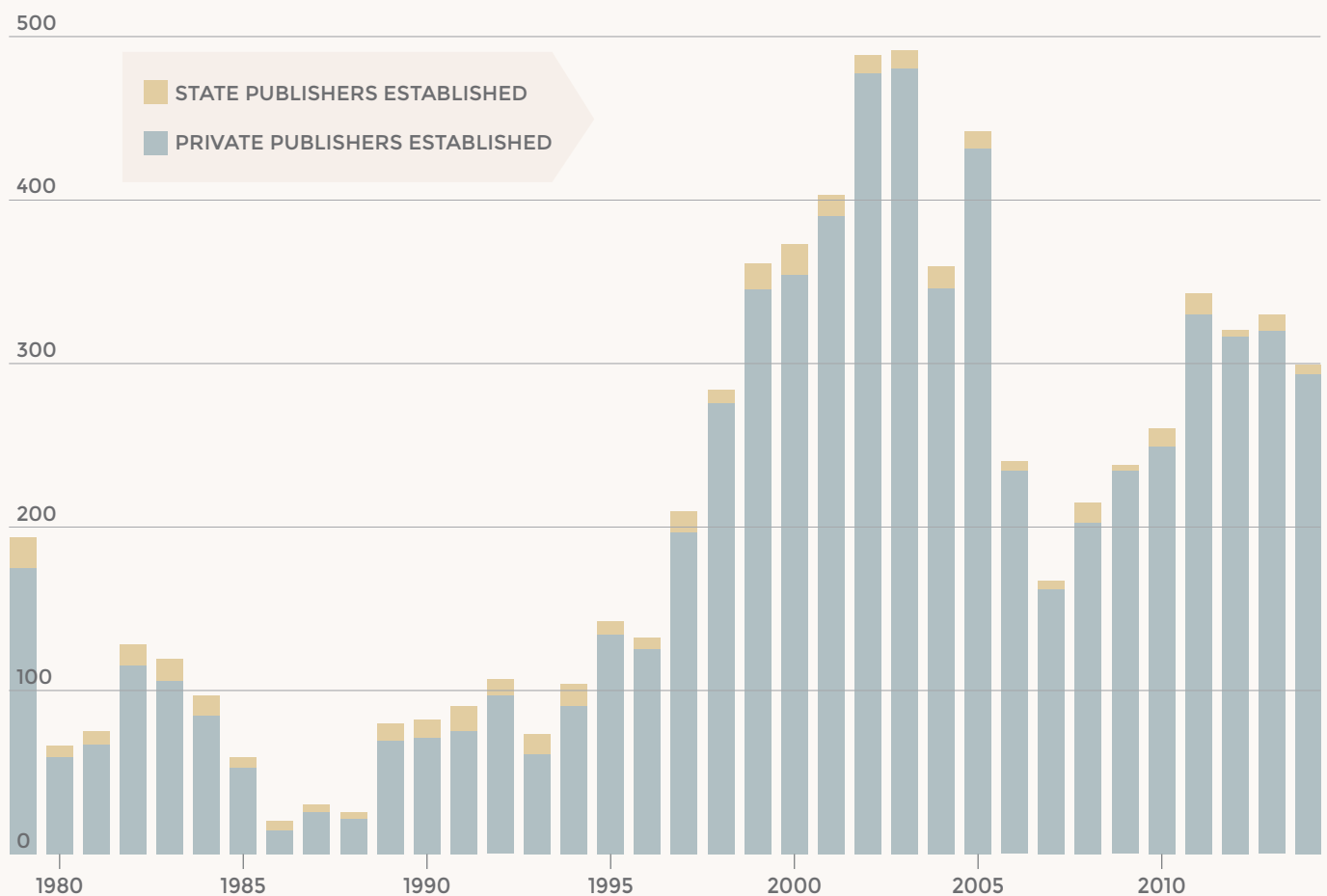
A book is a luxury product—you need to have food and clothing, and then you'll buy books. It's not just the price of paper that's increased—when household incomes decrease, books become an unnecessary purchase. You need to eat food first, then you can read. You can't just say you'll skip dinners for a week to buy a book.

Mahsa Mohebali
Writer
(Interview, 2015)



THE FALL, DECLINE IN PUBLISHERS UNDER AHMADINEJAD

New Publishers Established Per Year



Although paper prices stabilised towards the end of the Ahmadinejad period, the protracted economic crisis caused many publishing houses to shut their doors forever. The cost of books was simply astronomical, and consumer demand had collapsed.

Although we can't see how many publishers in our dataset were killed off by the crisis, we can see how the number of newly-registered publishing houses fell off a cliff during the Ahmadinejad period, with the growth rate dramatically slower than the Khatami era.

State-owned publishers were markedly less affected by this crisis. Afshin Shahne Tabar, Director of Candle and Fog Publishing explains:

The manager of a state-owned publisher has no concern whether he manages to sell his books or not—he receives funding anyway. If he is unlucky he could be sacked. But he has no need to worry about what happens if nobody buys his books. He can sleep solidly, without having to worry about an empty bank account. (Interview, 2015)

REGULAR CUSTOMERS, STATE-MANAGED BOOK PURCHASING

Universal paper subsidies may have died a death under Ahmadinejad, but his government continued a pre-existing policy of large-scale book purchasing. Under this system, the state provided indirect subsidies to publishers by purchasing a quantity of their books outright.

Although this system was expanded to make up for the loss of blanket paper subsidies, it didn't take long before publishing companies started to criticise the state-directed system as paving the way for endemic corruption in the sector. Whereas all state-directed book purchases during the Khatami administration were published in the weekly journal *Ketab-e Hafte* (*Book of the Week*), the Ahmadinejad administration failed to make the majority of their book purchasing decisions publicly available, although some records have leaked out into the public domain.

In 2005, the Tehran Union of Book Publishers released the following statement calling for reforms of existing purchasing processes, and for Ahmadinejad to introduce greater transparency to the system:

Making the books accessible for the whole nation... by purchasing books for all kinds of libraries—including public libraries, schools and mosques—could be an appropriate

alternative system for providing paper subsidies, assuming that the process is transparent, fair, and well-supervised. Unfortunately, this protectionist policy has become as corrupted as the original paper subsidies.

We believe that if... no solution is found for these problems, in the following years we will witness an unprecedented and tragic situation in the field of book publishing and consumption. (iKetab, 2007)

Some genres receive extensive state assistance in the form of bulk purchasing and subsidies, whereas other books are neglected completely. This state support is rooted in the official book publishing regulations from 2010, which mandate intervention in the sector.

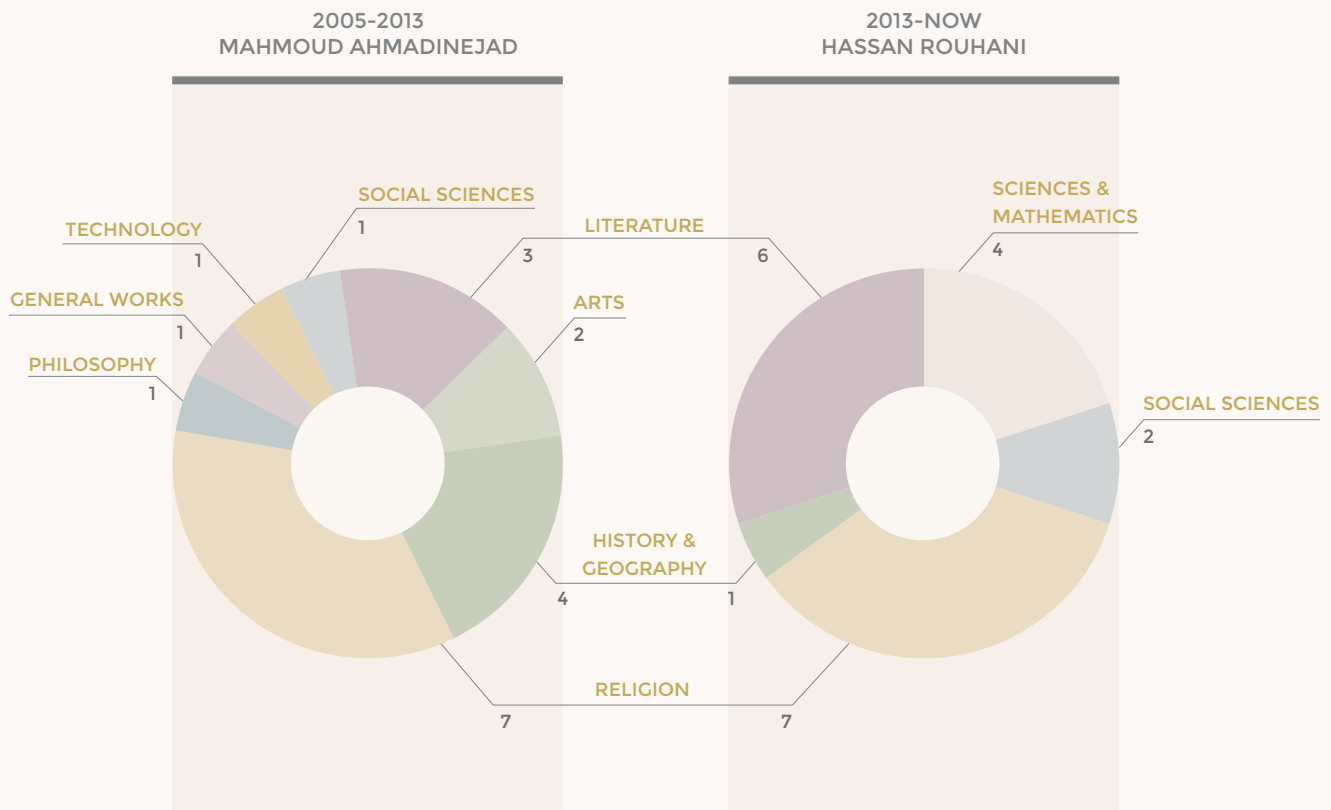
ARTICLE 14.5

Facilitate publicity for fine and decent books, and promote a culture of book reviews in the national media, and other media;

ARTICLE 14.11

Purchase appropriate and selected books and donate them to public libraries, libraries of schools, universities, mosques and the like inside the country and abroad for the purpose of guiding publishers towards creating fine works; (Objectives, Policies, and Regulations of Book Publishing, 2010)

State-Purchased Books by Genre



Snapping up a publisher's stock in this way achieves a couple of goals: it hands the publisher a healthy pay packet, and provides the state with a means of increasing the availability of a hand-picked selection of books.

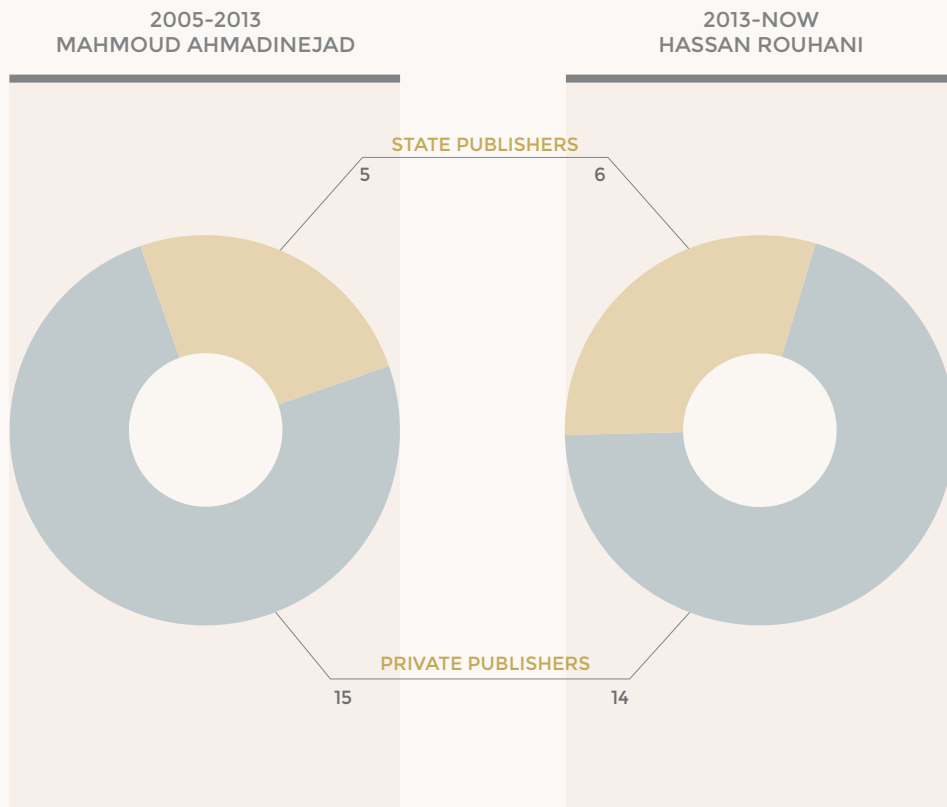
This process is often used by the government to buy up large quantities of books and distribute them to libraries, schools, and other public institutions. But what is the government buying?

We took a random sample of 20 books purchased by the Ahmadinejad and Rouhani administrations, in order to gain some insights into the kinds of books the state has been seeking to promote. Additionally, this data allows

us to see where the books are being bought from—is the government supporting the private sector, or just funnelling cash into state-owned publishing houses?

The Ahmadinejad government bought a lot of religious books. 35% of the Ahmadinejad-era sample is made up of religious texts, which include Qur'anic analyses and collections of the sayings of Shi'a Imams. History books in this sample concern either Ayatollah Khomeini, or the Iran-Iraq War—a subject that also serves as the focus of the state-purchased poetry collection in this data set. Faith and nation appear to have been major themes in the books purchased by the Ahmadinejad government.

State-Purchased Books by Ownership



By providing what are ultimately targeted subsidies to (primarily) the religious publishing sector, the Ahmadinejad-era government effectively encouraged publishing houses to mass-produce religious texts for sale to the state. Publishers know they don't have to worry about any censors, and realise they'll make a quick buck from the process. Everyone's a winner, right?

Our sample suggests that the ascent of Rouhani to the presidency has led to something of a shift in state book purchasing policy. Although religious books continue to comprise a large chunk of state-purchased books (35% of our sample), works of literature (poetry, novels and plays) are markedly better-supported by the Rouhani

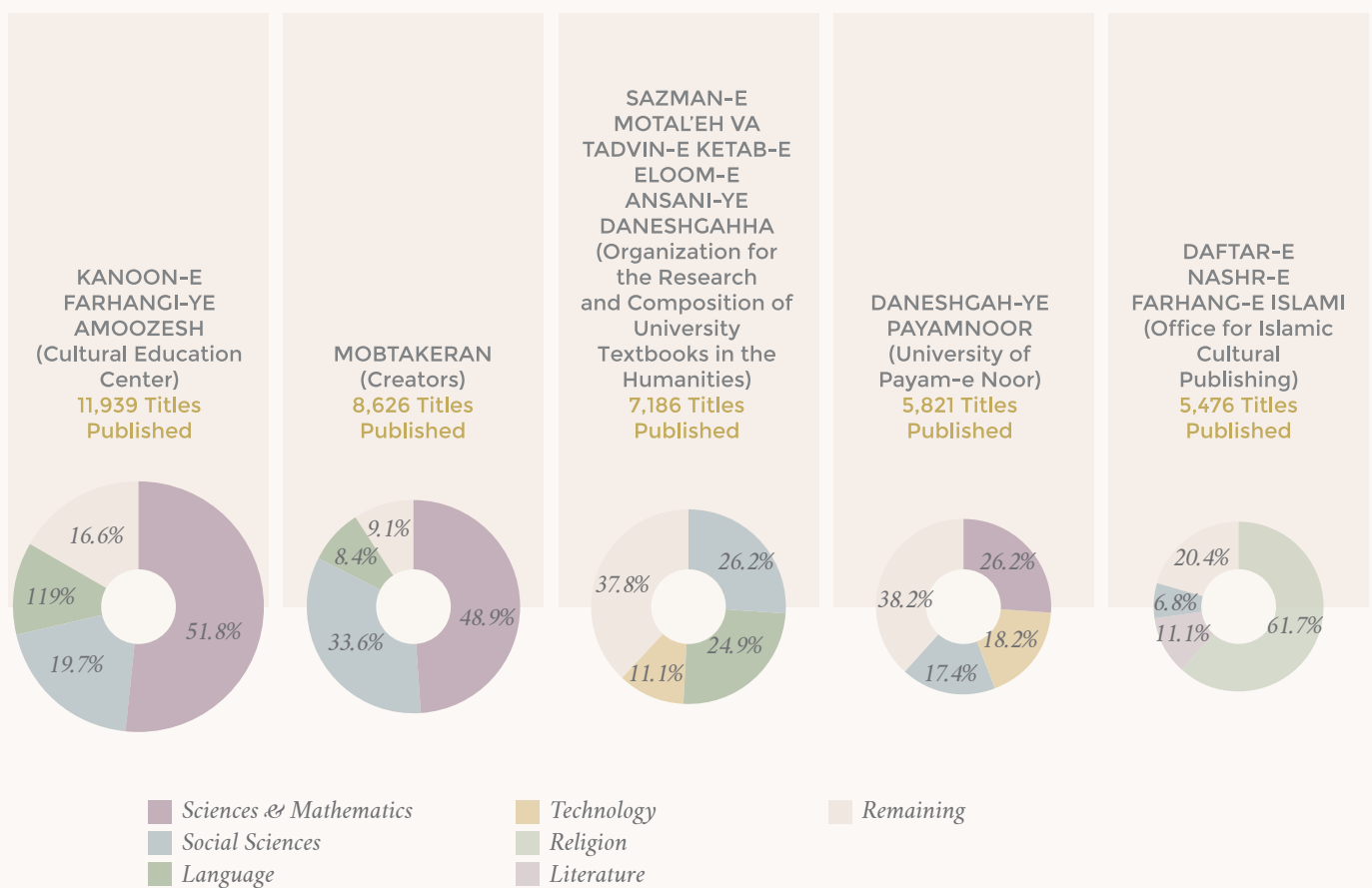
administration (30%) than they were under Ahmadinejad (5% of sample).

It's worth noting that this isn't sophisticated, high-brow fiction—all the works of fiction noted in the Rouhani sample are children's books, including titles such as *The Bus and the Sea* and *Until Sunlight*. But like the majority of the Rouhani sample, these books are not ideological tracts. Whereas 55% of the titles in our Ahmadinejad-era sample were rooted in themes central to state ideology (Islam, nationalism, Islamic Republicanism), only 40% of the Rouhani-era sample engaged with these themes.

SUCCESS STORIES, IRAN'S PUBLISHING GIANTS

Which publishers have managed to climb their way to the top of the pile, in the light of all these 'generous' state policies? Below are the five publishing houses with the greatest output in the post-Revolutionary period.

Iran's Most Active Publishers



Interestingly, the most prolific publishers don't produce huge quantities of religious books. Instead, they're academic publishers. The four most prolific publishing houses in Iran specialise in books about social sciences,

language instruction, natural sciences and technology. Only the fifth—the Office for Islamic Cultural Publishing—produces religious books in significant numbers.

THE ART OF KETABSAZI, FRAUD AND MISINFORMATION IN PUBLISHING

We have many publishers in Iran, but only 5% of them are active. When others want to renew their license, they forge a book by copying and pasting content together, going to the National Library, and conducting a print run of around 10-20 of them digitally. But when it is referred to the Ministry, the print run is submitted as 1000.

Afshin Shahne Tabar

Director, Candle and Fog Publishing

(Interview, 2015)

Not all publishers are so 'lucky' to get support from the government. Many have to make do without.

The problem for smaller, struggling publishers is that they're required to keep publishing work in order to keep their license. If they produce fewer than 4 publications in a year, their license is revoked.

This is a big ask for some organisations, especially in periods of economic crisis. So they game the system, through a process of ketabsazi— 'creating books'. Afshin Shahne Tabar describes the process:

We have many publishers in Iran, but only 5% of them are active. When others want to renew their license, they forge a book by copying and pasting content together, going to the National Library, and conducting a print run of around 10-20 of them digitally. But when it is referred to the Ministry, the print run is submitted as 1000.

Ten years ago, when the government was giving out paper subsidies, officers used to come from the MCIG to

count the number of books, making those numbers more reliable. Now, it is not so.

According to Ali Asghar Ramezanzpour, the former Deputy Minister at the MCIG, this process of massaging publication statistics was actively encouraged by the Ahmadinejad administration:

The MCIG, in order to increase the statistics in the database, allowed some university articles—often false or plagiarised—and written by students for academic purposes, to be published and included in the Book House database as proper books. During the Ahmadinejad era, the MCIG increased this kind of ketabsazi a lot, because they needed to increase the number of printed books in the database.

As a result we need to be very cautious when looking at any data from the Ahmadinejad period - small publishers falsified data in order to stay afloat, and the government did the same in order to lend their publishing policies some much-needed credibility.

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED, INFRASTRUCTURE AND DISTRIBUTION ISSUES

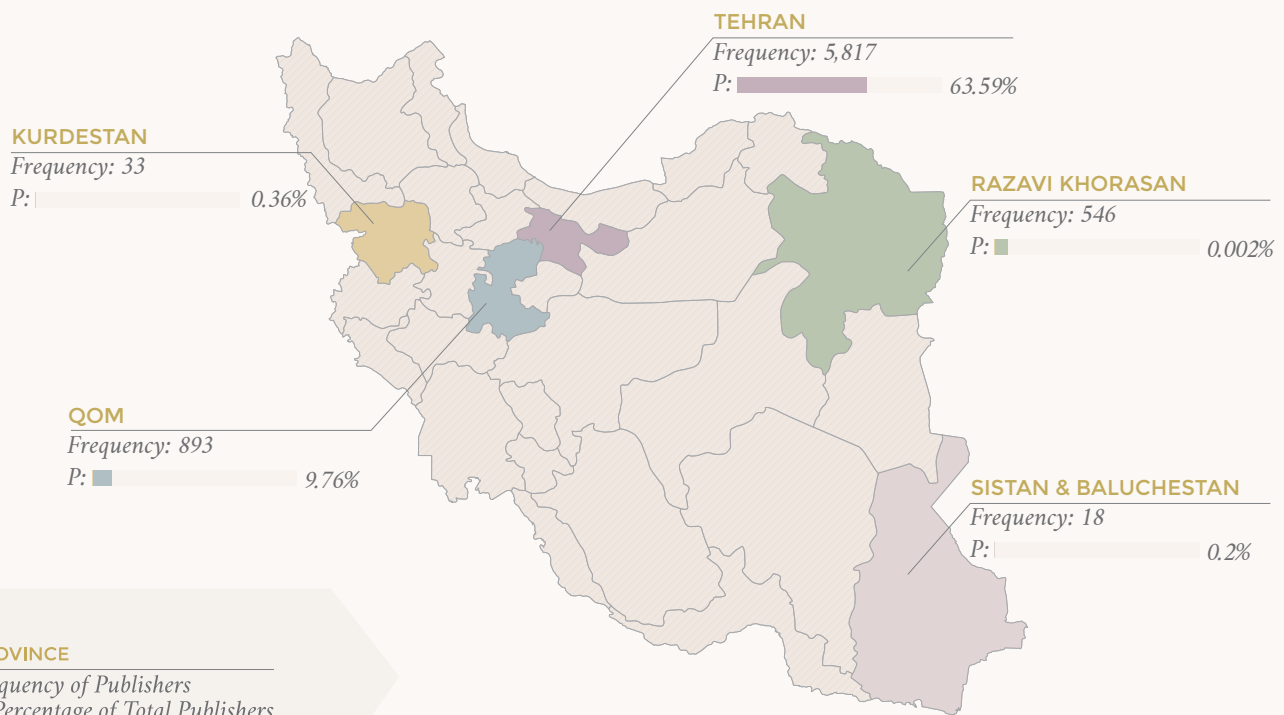
If you are not a Tehrani publisher, there are certain things you can't do. It's an essential issue. Even if you are based in Karaj—which is technically part of Tehran—you don't enjoy the same benefits as Tehran's publishers. The majority of the industry is rooted in Tehran, and other cities can't survive without depending on them.

Afshin Shahne Tabar

Director, Candle and Fog Publishing

(Interview, 2015)

Publishers per Province, 1979–2014

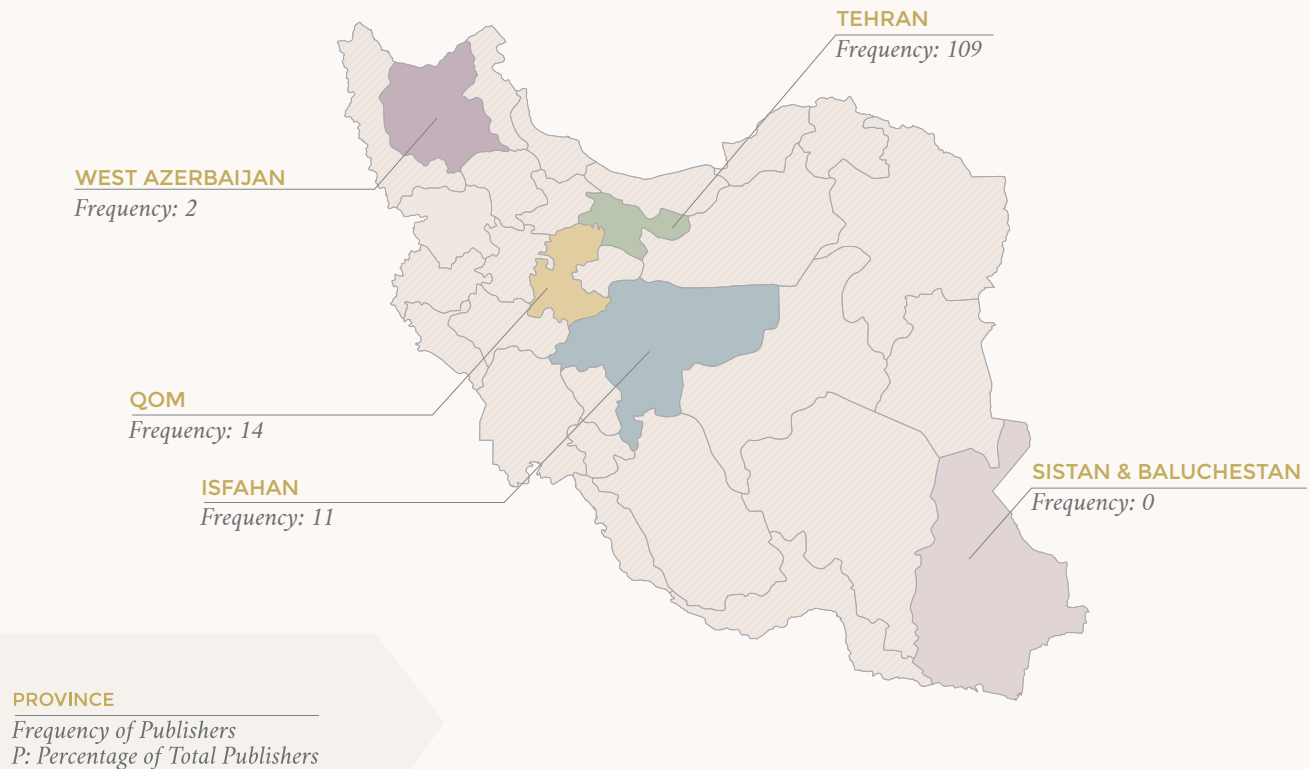


Although the publishing sector has been hamstrung by corruption and manipulation, there are other major obstacles to growth. The over-centralisation of the publishing sector in Tehran is an considerable structural issue that will be very difficult to overcome in the short-term.

Around 64% of registered publishing companies are based in Tehran, and 76% of titles printed since the Revolution have been produced there.



Distribution Centres per Province



This massive centralisation of production wouldn't be such a big deal if Iran had an effective distribution network to carry regionally-published books to the rest of the country, but the necessary infrastructure is concentrated almost exclusively in the capital.

This means that regional publishers face immense difficulty marketing their products to the rest of the country, hampering their growth. Afshin Shahne Tabar states that even publishers in major cities like Shiraz and Isfahan are completely dependent on the capital's infrastructure:

They're all supported from Tehran. Shiraz has good publishers, but there are fewer of them than there are fingers on my right hand, so they send their books to Tehran to get them distributed nationally. This transportation is expensive—sometimes they spend ¼ of a book's cost on shipping! (Interview, 2015)

Getting books out of the capital is complicated by the lack of regional distribution centres. Only 11 of Iran's 31 provinces are host to distribution centres at all, meaning that publishers and consumers are forced to rely on out-of-province distributors in order to disseminate and access newly-printed books. Ahmad Tahavori, the media director of Qoqnoos Publishing, described the importance of effective distribution networks to a book's success:

Many authors have said that properly distributing books is more important than getting them printed. After all, if a writer or a translator can't share his book with everyone he needs to, and the publisher can't have access to an efficient network of distribution, then you may as well just give up and not bother publishing it in the first place. (Interview, 2015)

TURNING THE PAGE? HOPE IN THE POST- LAUSANNE ERA

With the progress in talks between Iran and the international community, and the resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue, the sanctions will be lifted and the pressure and recession affecting Iran's economy could end.

Anita Yarmohammadi

Writer

(Interview, 2015)

The end of the West's suffocating sanctions has led some commentators to hope that the publishing sector might be able to recover some vitality within a revitalised national economy. The tentative nuclear agreement reached in Lausanne in 2015 could solve the issue of sanctions, and has offered writers hope that the economic hardships that have paralysed the publishing sector might be over.

CONCLUSION

Crippling sanctions, endemic corruption, and an overwhelming Tehran-centricity have proven to form a lethal cocktail for many of Iran's publishing houses. Outside the capital, underinvestment in the sector and limited interest from readers have inhibited the development of the publishing sector nationwide. Chronic infrastructural inadequacies have pushed up book prices and limited the availability of new books even in some of Iran's largest cities.

The traditional model of publishing in Iran is troubled. Even putting the issue of censorship aside for a moment, the economic and structural problems that we've discussed have plunged the publishing sector into a deep malaise. Radical solutions are required. Thankfully, some bold new innovators have begun to step up to the mark.

A GLOBAL REVOLUTION? SOLUTIONS AT HOME AND IN THE DIASPORA

A number of publishing houses have been set up by Iranians in the diaspora, and have worked for decades to publish and promote the work of Iranian authors who face censorship at home.

BARAN PUBLISHING

Baran Publishing was founded in 1991 in Stockholm. To date, it has published over 350 Persian-language books, and 10 in Swedish.

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

'About Us'
(2014)

NAAKOJAA

Naakojaa is a Paris-based publishing house founded in 2012. It publishes Persian-language literature in printed, audio, and e-book formats.

Naakoja is faithful to the fundamental principle of freedom to publish, without limitations. The only criteria we use to choose books is their quality... Publishing the work of young and lesser-known authors and translators is one of Naakoja's important goals.

Tinouche Nazmjou

Director of Naakojaa
(Interview, 2014)

NOGAAM

Nogaam is an independent online publisher based in London, focusing on Persian-language literature that is censored in Iran. It was founded in 2012, and has published 25 books to date.

There is no one you need to answer to. You don't have any barrier in publishing anything and the publisher can have its own policies. There is no system to limit you.

Azadeh Iravani

Director of Nogaam
(Interview, 2014)

Working in diaspora isn't free from challenges. The Iranian diaspora community is large, but thinly-spread, and divorced from the market back in Iran. Diaspora publishers can't ship books home without some difficulty, and can struggle to cater for a market scattered around the world.

In 2014 the director of Baran, Masoud Mafan, stated that the global distribution of the diaspora posed a challenge to publishers, especially when it comes to distributing printed books (2014).

In response, a number of publishers have embraced e-publishing and online initiatives such as crowdfunding in order to rejuvenate the diaspora publishing sector, and overcome the problem of diaspora distribution.

*We can keep modern Persian literature
alive by modern means.*

Azadeh Iravani

Director of Nogaam

(Interview, 2014)

Naakojaa's publishing model is mixed: it publishes ebooks and physical books. Director Tinouche Nazmjou explained that this approach will be necessary until more Iranian readers embrace e-publishing:

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 needs of the Iranians who haven't adopted this way by publishing physical books.

Tinouche Nazmjou, director of Naakojaa (*Interview, 2014*) Nogaam offers a more radical model. Authors submit their manuscripts for review by an expert board and, if approved, the books become 'projects' on the website. These projects are then 'crowdfunded' by supporters, to cover Nogaam's operating costs. Once they've been edited and formatted, books are made available for free download on the Nogaam website. As of May 2015, Nogaam's 25 books have been downloaded over 70,000 times.

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 modern means.

Azadeh Iravani, director of Nogaam (*Interview, 2014*).

Qoqnoos is an Iran-based publisher that deals primarily in print, rather than e-books. But Ahmad Tahavori, an editor and media director at the publisher suggests that e-publishing is starting to take off inside the country.

Many publishers are getting worried that they can't be successful competing with [e-publishers], so they're adapting to these new conditions and adjusting their contracts with authors in a way that allows them to put books online... and offer an electronic print-run to the market. (Interview, 2014)

Rejuvenating the Iranian publishing sector from the diaspora will be tricky. The uptake of e-readers in Iran

TESTIMONIALS

ON UNDERGROUND PUBLISHING:

Underground publishing is becoming more significant with the growing popularity of a machines that allow people to print a very limited number of books—100 or 200. At one point, these kinds of machines were banned—you needed government permission to buy one. In recent years it's become possible to get these machines without any pressure from the government. Authorities have more important problems to worry about! It has been thanks to these machines that the underground publishing has grown. For example, bookshops in Engelab Square in Tehran sell any kind of book that you could want—even the banned ones like “Reading Lolita in Tehran”!

Ali Asghar Ramezani

former Deputy Minister of Cultural Affairs,
2000-2003 (Interview, 2015)

ON DRM:

In Iran people think that e-books are just scanned PDFs. And publishers don't trust any organisations that make them, because they feel it's unsafe to give away their book files as e-books. They don't trust how many copies they really sell. [Also], existing digital rights management (DRM) laws are insufficient.

Afshin Shahne Tabar
Director of Candle and Fog
(Interview, 2015)

ON PROMOTION:

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.

Azadeh Iravani
Director of Nogaam
(Interview, 2014)



Self-publishing writers who use the internet to distribute their books have been very active in the last year, since the MCIG became less harsh. So now we can see new trends in the Iranian publishing sector that are going to change the market. There are authors who have already sold 10,000 self-published books on the internet.

Ali Asghar Ramezani

Former Deputy Minister of Cultural Affairs,
2000-2003 (Interview, 2015)

has been slow, partly as a result of domestic Iranian publishers' apparent skepticism of the new format.

The slow growth of the e-book market inside Iran has meant that in roads into the market for diaspora publishers remain few and far between. Slow internet access is a roadblock to vibrant online markets, although the internet penetration rate in Iran is continuing to grow at a healthy rate, hitting 49% by the end of 2014 .

The market is still coming to terms with the emergence of e-publishing, and as numerous publishers have highlighted, publisher and reader skepticism is inhibiting the growth of the e-publishing sector in Iran. But for non-Tehrani and minority language authors, e-publishing could potentially be an effective tool to evade censorship and further efforts should be made by writers and publishers to support and promote the uptake of e-books inside Iran. Although this process may be a slow one, there are indications that writers are starting to experiment with e-publishing formats more

enthusiastically than publishers, with online self-publishing experiencing something of a boom period:

Self-publishing writers who use the internet to distribute their books have been very active in the last year, since the MCIG became less harsh. So now we can see new trends in the Iranian publishing sector that are going to change the market. There are authors who have already sold 10,000 self-published books on the internet.

Ali Asghar Ramezani, former Deputy Minister of Cultural Affairs, 2000-2003 (Interview, 2015)

It's not just the internet that's emancipated Iranian writers. The growing availability of home printing equipment is allowing writers to self-publish print copies of their books from home. According to Ramezani, government regulations on home printing presses have eased in recent years, leading to an explosion in the number of unregistered and underground books on market stalls across Iran.

CONCLUSION & FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Hassan Rouhani was elected in 2013 on the promise that he would allow Iran's cultural scene the space to flourish, free from the worst excesses of censorship that defined his predecessor's administration. This report has shown how the new administration has made progress in some important areas, but significant barriers to freedom of expression remain.

Small Media has a number of recommendations that we believe would encourage the further growth and free development of the Iranian publishing sector.

The Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran should:

- *Abolish the practice of pre-publication censorship.*
- *Lift the requirement to register all published books with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.*
- *Subject the Objectives, Policies and Regulations of Book Publishing (2010) bill to a comprehensive review that will ensure its compliance with Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Iran's international obligations to uphold freedom of expression.*
- *Invest in capacity building and infrastructure development for book transport and distribution around the country, in line with Article 14 of the 2010 book publishing regulations.*
- *Permit the publication of minority language literature on the same grounds as Persian literature.*
- *Maintain current efforts to eradicate illiteracy in Iran.*
- *Expand efforts to encourage a culture of reading in Iran, and increase the number of citizens actively reading books.*

To the talented writers, publishers, civil society groups, and activists working to promote freedom of expression in Iran, and who hope to breathe fresh life into the Iranian literary world, Small Media would offer the following observations:

- *E-publishing and online self-publishing offer paths towards greater autonomy for writers and publishing houses active in Iran.*
- *Diaspora-based publishers can offer valuable creative spaces for Iran-based writers to explore themes and topics considered 'off-limits' within Iran's traditional publishing system.*
- *As smartphone and internet penetration rates continue to rise inside Iran, the potential consumer base for internet-delivered e-publications is expanding.*
- *Sidestepping the expensive traditional production and distribution processes, e-publications can be delivered to Iranians at far lower prices than traditional books—an attractive prospect for consumers given the ongoing squeeze on household finances.*

Small Media would therefore argue that the further development of the e-publishing sector should be a priority for those with an interest in combating censorship, promoting free expression, and encouraging engagement around issues of political, social, and cultural importance to the Iranian people. Innovative activists and entrepreneurs in Iran and the diaspora are accomplishing great things, but there is still so much untapped potential for growth.

Rouhani's government appears unwilling to dismantle the censorship system, which continues to enforce the state's 'red lines' despite some limited relaxation around social issues. Whereas Rouhani offers writers a loosening of their chains, a strong e-publishing sector has the potential to emancipate them completely by making the censorship system irrelevant to the process of writing, publishing, and distributing literature.

As we have noted, the problems facing Iran's publishing sector are immense. Truly radical solutions are required—solutions that Rouhani's government has so far proven unwilling to implement. We hope that publishers, writers, and innovators in Iran and around the world can work together to produce the radical and transformative solutions that are needed to kickstart a new golden age for Iranian literature.

GOT AN IDEA??

As the e-publishing sector continues to expand in the coming months and years, Small Media would welcome opportunities to work with publishers, activists, and change-makers to promote free expression in the Iranian literary world. If you would be interested in working with us to support new innovations in the sector, please get in touch by any of these methods:



TWITTER



FACEBOOK



WEBSITE



E-MAIL



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AllHumanRightsIran Südwind, (2014), 'Südwind, 27th Session of HRC, "Sharifeh Jafari", Persian', *Youtube*, last accessed: 6/5/2015, available at: <http://bit.ly/shrfhjfri>
- Ansari, Ali, (2003), *Modern Iran Since 1921: The Pahlavis and After*, Longman: London
- Ashraf, Ahmad, Ali Banuazizi (2001), 'Iran's Tortuous Path Toward "Islamic Liberalism"', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 15.2 pp. 237-256
- Atwood, Blake, (2012), 'Sense and Censorship in the Islamic Republic of Iran', *World Literature Today* 86.3, pp. 38-41
- Axworthy, Michael, (2008), *Iran: Empire of the Mind*, Penguin: London
- Banani, Amin, (1961), *The Modernisation of Iran: 1921-41*, Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA
- Baran, (2014) 'About Baran', last accessed: 6/5/2015, available at: <http://bit.ly/abBRN>
- Borjian, Maryam, (2013), *English in Post-Revolutionary Iran: From Indigenization to Internationalization, Multilingual Matters*: Bristol
- Collin, Matthew, (2006), 'Iran Azeris protest over cartoon', *BBC News*, last accessed: 6/5/2015, available at: <http://bit.ly/bbcazri>
- Djavadi, Abbas, (2010), 'Iran's Ethnic Azeris and the Language Question', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, last accessed: 6/5/2015, available at: <http://bit.ly/abbsazri>
- FAOSTAT, (2015), 'FAOSTAT / Forestry / Forestry Production and Trade', last accessed: 6/5/2015, available at: <http://bit.ly/faostat2015>
- Ghoreishi, Kaveh, (2015), 'For the first time, Kurdish language and literature taught in schools', [Persian], *RoozOnline*, last accessed: 6/5/2015, available at: <http://bit.ly/ghrshikvh>
- Haqiqi, Fuad, (2013), available at: <http://bit.ly/hqqfd> (2015), 'In Iran, volunteer centres keep Kurdish language alive', *Rudaw*, last accessed: 6/5/2015, available at: <http://bit.ly/hqqfd2015>
- iKetaab, (2007), 'A letter from the Union of Booksellers and Publishers to the Parliamentary Culture Committee', last accessed: 6/5/2015, available at: <http://bit.ly/iketab07>
- Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre, (2012), 'Pressures on Kurdish students and teachers in Marivan continue', last accessed: 6/5/2015, available at: <http://bit.ly/kurdmарivan>
- Islamic Republic of Iran, (1989) 'Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran', last accessed: 6/5/2015, available at: <http://bit.ly/iricon1989> (2010), 'Objectives, Policies, and Regulations of Book Publishing'
- MacEoin, Denis, (1983), 'From Babism to Baha'ism: Problems of Militancy, Quietism, and Conflation in the Construction of a Religion', *Religion* 13, pp. 219-255
- Marcinkowski, Christoph, (2012), 'Persian Historical Writing Under the Safavids (1501-1722/36)', in (eds.) José Rabasa, Masayuki Sato, Edoardo Tortarolo, and Daniel Woolf, 'The Oxford History of Historical Writing, Vol. 3', Oxford University Press: Oxford, pp. 173-191
- Martyr Avini Cultural Institute, (2015), 'Colour Tinged With Lost Identity' [Persian], available at: <http://bit.ly/avini2015>

Mirzaei, Ida, (2014), 'Government Policy, Inflation, and Exchange Rates in the Era of Sanctions: The Case of Contemporary Iran', *Harvard Economics Review*, last accessed: 6/5/2015, available at: <http://bit.ly/mirzaei2014>

Mollanazar, Hussein, (2010), *Text Screening (Censorship) in Iran: A Historical Perspective*, Thesis, Allameh Tabataba'i University: Tehran

Moslem, Mehdi, (2002), *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran*, Syracuse University Press: Syracuse, NY

New York Times, (1981), Cleric Sworn In As Iran's President Amid Cries of 'Death To America!'

Soleimani, Karim (2013), 'Press Censorship in the Reza Shah Era', in Devos, Bianca and Christoph Werner (eds.) *Culture and Cultural Politics Under Reza Shah: The Pahlavi State, New Bourgeoisie and the Creation of a Modern Society in Iran*, Routledge: London, pp. 181-198

Radio Zamaneh, (2015), 'Rohani adviser touts intentions to teach minority dialects', last accessed: 6/5/2015, available at: <http://bit.ly/zamaneh>

Ranjbaran, Ehsan, (2014), 'Books and the Economy are Lost' *Shargh*, last accessed: 6/5/2015, available at: <http://bit.ly/rnjbarn>

Riazi, Abdolmehdi, (2013), 'The Four Language Stages in the History of Iran', in Lin, Angel M.Y. and Peter W. Martin, *Decolonisation, Globalisation: Language-in-Education Policy and Practice*, Cromwell Press: Clevedon, pp. 98-114

Samii, A. William, (2002), 'Factionalism in Iran's Domestic Security Services', *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* 4.2, (Online), last accessed: 6/5/2015, available at: <http://bit.ly/smii02>

Sandler, Rivanne, (1986), 'Literary Developments in Iran in the 1960s and the 1970s Prior to the 1978 Revolution', *World Literature Today* 60.2, pp. 246-251

Ward, Steven, (2014), *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces*, Georgetown University Press: Washington, DC

Vanzan, Anna, (2013), 'From the Pen to the Rotary Press: Women Book Publishers in Post-Revolutionary Iran', in (eds.) Annabelle Sreberny, Massoumeh Torfeh, *Cultural Revolution in Iran: Contemporary Popular Culture in the Islamic Republic*, I.B. Taurus: London, pp. 231-243

INTERVIEWS

Feilli, Payam (2015, March 18), Telephone interview.

Iravani, Azadeh, (2014, October 7), Personal Interview.

Jodeyri, Sepideh, (2015, March 24), Email interview.

Mohebali, Mahsa, (2015, April 4), Personal interview.

Nazmjou, Tinouche, (2014, October 11), Email interview.

Ramezanpour, Ali Asghar, (2015, March 13), Telephone interview.

Shahne Tabar, Afshin, (2015, March 18), Telephone interview.

Tahavori, Ahmad, (2015, March 29), Email interview.

Tolouei, Mohammad, (2015, March 12), Personal interview.

Yarmohammadi, Anita, (2015, April 2), Email interview.