

# Text Screening (Censorship) in Iran: A Historical Perspective

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## Abstract

Censorship has a long history in Iran that has interfered with text production, i.e., original writing as well as translation. This phenomenon seems to have marked the borderline between the government and the 'enlightened' intellectuals throughout history in Iran. Different governments have delineated 'redlines' for authors and translators and dealt with these constructors of culture based on the definitions they set for those 'redlines'. This historical research aims at exploring and finding out the features of these 'redlines' as well as the mechanisms and rules of text screening (censorship) throughout Iran's modern era since the importing of the printing press.

**Keywords:** Censorship, Self-censorship, Bowdlerization, Text Screening, *Mobtazal*, *Mohāreb*, *Zālleh*, Sanctities, Sensitive Texts, Taboos

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## 1. Introduction

In an article published in *the Economist*, an anonymous author writes,

Two decades after the *fatwa* was imposed on Mr Rushdie, it appears that many Western artists, publishers and governments are more willing today to sacrifice some of their freedom of speech than was the case in 1989. To many critics that will be seen as self-censorship that has gone too far. But a difficult balance must be struck: no country permits completely free speech. Typically, it is limited by prohibitions against libel, defamation, obscenity, judicial or parliamentary privilege and the like. Protecting free expression will often require hurting the feelings of individuals or groups; equally the use of free speech should be tempered by a sense of responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

In an article<sup>2</sup>, Ali Mazrui (1997), professor at the State University of New York at Binghamton, talks of the western hypocrisy in the case of Rushdie,

Censorship is one issue on which the cultural divide between the West and Islam turns out to be less wide than Westerners ordinarily assume. The most celebrated case of the last decade – that of Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses*, published in Britain in 1988 but banned in most Muslim countries – brought the Western world and the Muslim world in conflict, but also uncovered some surprising similarities and large helpings of Western hypocrisy. Further scrutiny reveals widespread censorship in the West, if imposed by different forces than in Muslim societies. [...]

Many devout Muslims felt that Rushdie had no right to poke fun at and twist into obscenity some of the most sacred symbols of Islam. Most Muslim countries banned the novel because officials there considered it morally

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Self-Censorship in the West: Speech Impediments’, *the Economist*, February 14, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Ali Mazrui, “Islamic Values, the Liberal Ethic and the West,” *Foreign Affairs* (1997, September/October, Vol. 76, No. 5, pp. 118–132)

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repugnant. Western intellectuals argued that as an artist, Rushdie had the sacred right and even duty to go wherever his imagination led him in his writing. Yet until the 1960s *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was regarded as morally repugnant under British law for daring to depict an affair between a married member of the gentry and a worker on the estate. [...]

Comparing censorship in Muslim and Western countries, he also adds,

Targets, sources, and methods of censorship differ, but censorship is just as much a fact of life in Western societies as in the Muslim world. Censorship in the latter is often crude, imposed by governments, mullahs and imams, and, more recently, militant Islamic movements. Censorship in the West, on the other hand, is more polished and decentralized. Its practitioners are financial backers of cultural activity and entertainment, advertisers who buy time on commercial television, subscribers of the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), influential interest groups including ethnic pressure groups, and editors, publishers, and other controllers of the means of communication. In Europe, governments, too, sometimes get into the business of censorship.

Censorship or screening has a long history all over the world. It is mingled with inquisition in the Catholic Europe in the Middle Ages.

According to Rajabzadeh, the birth of censorship in the west goes back to Ancient Rome in which two censorship centers (referred to as two censors in Khosravi's research) were in charge of controlling people's lives, giving them duties and checking to see how well they obey the orders. The power of these censorship authorities was even sometimes more than the king. Later in the Middle Ages, new types of censorship came into being. Writers were obliged to hand a copy of their work to higher authorities first in order to show their respect and second in order to let them censor what they determine to be

harmful or unnecessary. Catholic cathedral in the thirteenth century set a court for investigating beliefs and no one was out of it. They even had the right to accuse books which were previously allowed by the pope himself.

Systematic censorship started with the invention of print machine. In the First World War, there existed no specific rule for censoring the press. An informal and internal agreement had been formed between government and the press for not printing information which might have caused sensitivity.

Censorship has always had its ups and downs in the west. Though these days it is claimed that censorship is limited and free expression of thought is the current trend of western countries, still one can see cases of formal and many informal censorship cases. Considering that even the term “censorship” is itself considered to be taboo, in western countries, there are no regulations covering particular strategies or cases of censorship clearly.

There are different types of censorship. *The World Book Encyclopedia* (1976, p. 258) classifies major types of censorship as follows: moral, military, political, and religious. Khosravi (1378 AH/1999, p. 73) classifies censorship types as follows: socio-political, ethical, and religious. Rajabzadeh (1380 AH/2001, p. 18) adds another type to the above ones, i.e., economic censorship. Rajabzadeh (ibid.) writes that other types of censorship can also exist, for instance, cultural censorship which refers to self-censorship and academic censorship which refers to obstacles and limitations to the publication of scientific researches' conclusions.

Religions and political regimes try to protect their very existence against all sorts of hostilities and threats. During crises, these powerful bodies treat quite harshly, particularly when their control is shaky.

Translation is an ongoing conflict between loyalty to the original text and its agenda or purpose on the one hand, and loyalty to the target language, culture,

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society and their norms on the other. In each country, or more precisely, in each culture, there exists a number of norms that determine the strategies for translating.

These norms are generated from the ideology and values dominant in that society, all together forming its culture. Based on society's norms, the commissioner, initiator, publisher and others, who are in fact determiners of norms, convert these norms to social regularities. Social regularities shape our mind in all aspects of life. They bear different levels of strength and depth and are era-specific. One of the most controversial issues in translation, and to some extent other human sciences, are cultural differences including taboos, sensitive religious, moral, political points of concern and various approaches to life and reality; a major concern here is how to deal with them with the least negative effect.

As a conventional and inextricably intertwined act with writers, publishers and translators, censorship performs a very discreet though significant role in our society, by filtering data and letting in the pre-defined material which is safe to the culture and social regularities. So far little attention has been devoted to the commonly used censorship strategies in translation.

## **2. History of Censorship in Iran**

In an announcement published in issue number 552 (of 22 December 1863) of the *Rūznāme-ye Dowlat-e 'Āliye-ye Iran* ('the journal of the Exalted State of Iran'), censorship (the need to inhibit publication of material harmful to morality and the state and also contrary to religious law) started officially in

Iran.<sup>3</sup> Sani' ol-Molk or Sani' od-Dowle (1840–96) (later named E'atemad os-Saltane<sup>4</sup>) who was in charge of the newspaper as well as the head of the Governmental Translation, Printing, and Publishing Office was appointed to supervise the materials to be printed. He ordered that all the materials to be printed had to be stamped by him and called this procedure 'the establishment of internal censorship'.<sup>5</sup>

However, the first code of censorship was issued within a statute of criminal laws in 1879 proposed by the Count de Monte Farte, an Italian adventurer who served as the commander of the police (or *Nazmīye*) of the Naser od-Din Shah's court. In the section concerning the freedom of expression and writing it prescribes:

If someone publishes a book that is against the religion, or government or people, he will be imprisoned from 5 months to five years. (...) If someone dares to stick announcements or any kind of written materials in the streets against the king, whoever he is, (...) he will be imprisoned from one month

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<sup>3</sup> As regards the incident that instigated this announcement, it has been said, 'Censorship was first introduced in Nasir al-Din Shah's time when he became incensed over a verse satire published in Bombay. The author was a Shaikh Hasan-i Shirazi, who ridiculed the aspirants to learning patronized by the Court. The Shah demanded of the I'timad al-Saltana how such pernicious attacks printed abroad and critical of his regime might be stopped entering Iran. The I'timad al-Saltana explained how European states had an arrangement called *sānsūr*, "censor". The Shah commanded the establishment of such a system so that "henceforth the way of this vice might be blocked and the threat of this traffic broken".' (Avery, in *The Cambridge History of Iran, vol. 7*, p. 828)

<sup>4</sup> Concerning gentlemen's titles in Iran during the Qajar dynasty, Edward Browne writes, 'Everybody of any consequence in Persia has a title, and these titles are generally compounded with one of these three words [i.e., 'Molk,' 'Dowle,' and 'Saltane], e.g., Mushirud-Dawla ("Counsellor of the Empire"), Nasirul-Mulk ("Helper of the Kingdom"), Ihtishamus-Saltana ("Pomp of the Sovereignty"), etc. (Edward Browne, p. 45f). Moreover, 'Mirza' (before the name) and 'Khan' (after the name) — meaning 'Mr.' and 'Master' (or 'Lord') respectively — were widely used. However, the clergy had a different set of ranks and titles.

<sup>5</sup> See Khosravi, pp. 144-145

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to five years in proportion to the gravity of his faulty act. (...) If someone disputes and has plans to instigate revolt against the government or slander and defame in written form against the government, he will be imprisoned from one to fifteen years in proportion to the gravity of the fault, if he is proved guilty.<sup>6</sup>

In brief, the Naser od-Din Shah's period started with unofficial screening. Then prior-to-publishing censorship became prevalent. The term 'censor' entered Persian literature, and the censoring office, the Ministry of '*Entebā'āt*' ('Printing and Publishing Affairs'), began to screen the press, and the importation of all the printed materials to the country were monitored.<sup>7</sup>

Among the first novels censored in Iran were Zain al-Abidin Maraghe'i's novel *Safar-Nāme-ye Ebrahim Beig* or *Sīāhat-nāme-ye Ebrahim Beig* ('Ibrahim Beig's Travel Story') (1895) and Abd or-Rahim Talebof's novel *Masālek ol-Mohsenīn* ('*The Journeys of the Virtuous*') (1905) as '*mamnū'e*' ('prohibited') or '*zālle*' ('misguiding') books.<sup>8</sup> Regarding the first translations being censored, it is noteworthy to mention that Mirza Muhammad Khan E'atemad os-Saltane, who was in charge of the official censorship in Iran during Naser od-Din Shah as well as the head of the Translation Bureau of the Dar ol-Fonun college, translated *The Comprehensive History of Louis XIV*, Mademoiselle Montpensier's *Mémoires* and Comtesse de Ségur's *Mémoires d'un Âne* which were banned by Naser od-Din Shah due to the 'dangerous consequences' of reading these books.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Khosravi, pp. 146-147. (My translation)

<sup>7</sup> See Khosravi, p. 151.

<sup>8</sup> See *Seyed-Hassan Taqizadeh*, pp. 23.

<sup>9</sup> See Va'ez Shahrestani, p. 93.

The 20<sup>th</sup> article of the amendment to the first constitutional law of Iran ratified in 1907 reads: ‘All publications are free, except the *zalāl* (‘misguiding’) books and materials harmful to Islam, and it is forbidden to screen them [i.e., the press].’<sup>10</sup> The 24<sup>th</sup> article reads: ‘the publications and the press are free to express views unless they undermine the principles of Islam or public rights. The law will determine the details.’<sup>11</sup>

According to the press law in Iran during the Pahlavi dynasty, if a book, essay or any cultural form of expression violated one of the following sanctities, it would be censored:

- (1) The political foundation that created the national unity
- (2) The faith of Islam
- (3) The Pahlavi dynasty
- (4) Public decency.

In practice, other rules were involved, such as a ban on speaking against friendly countries, notably the Allied countries during World War II and the US and Israel after 1953, writing or translating Marxist or revolutionary texts or on any social movements, publishing books in other local languages or dialects other than Persian, or saying anything against corruption among high-ranking officials, using any proper names or nick names kept exclusively by the Royal family, or revealing any tortures in the regime’s prisons.<sup>12</sup> During the Pahlavi dynasty there were times when censorship became harsher. According to Mir-

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<sup>10</sup> Edward G. Browne provides a translation of the whole Article 20 in his book *The Persian Revolution of 1905–1909* as follows: ‘All publications, except heretical books and matters hurtful to the perspicuous religion [of Islam] are free, and are exempt from censorship. If, however, anything should be discovered in them contrary to the Press law, the publisher or writer is liable to punishment according to that law. If the writer be known, and be resident in Persia, then the publisher, printer and distributor shall not be liable to prosecution.’ (Edward G. Browne, p. 375)

<sup>11</sup> Khosravi, p. 43. (My translation)

<sup>12</sup> See Khosravi, pp. 184-196.



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abedini, from the year 1933 to his exile in 1941 (by the Allied Forces) during Reza Khan's rule censorship reached its climax; the Organisation for Nurturing Intellects was established to supervise, censor and direct thoughts.<sup>13</sup> After the American-led coup d'état [1953] many authors either emigrated or were sent to prison or into exile.<sup>14</sup> As Mir-abedini puts it, censorship affected original fiction writing but contributed to the boom in translation:

The censorship after the coup d'état prevents the growth of Iranian progressive fiction writing. The printing of valuable works is problematic. The author who cannot raise essential social issues -and who often lacks the capability of creating a comprehensive artistic work at the same time - regards it as wise to turn to translation.<sup>15</sup>

In 1966 during Muhammad Reza Shah's rule, the government ordered publishers to present their printed books to the Office of Book Writing in the Ministry of Culture and Art before publishing them.<sup>16</sup> The Authors' Association was established in 1967 to defend the authors' rights to free expression. The period between 1971 and 1976 is considered as the years of the 'aggression of censorship'.<sup>17</sup>

In practice, translated texts have benefited from a lenient treatment in Iran except for the novels translated from the Soviet Union and other communist countries which were considered to contain direct ideological agitation and propaganda for Communism, notably after the American-led Coup d'état in 1953. During the Pahlavi dynasty anything considered communist or fundamentally Islamic would be suppressed.

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<sup>13</sup> See Mir-abedini, p. 124.

<sup>14</sup> See Mir-abedini, p. 295.

<sup>15</sup> Mir-abedini, p. 259. (My translation)

<sup>16</sup> See Mir-abedini, p. 416.

<sup>17</sup> See Mir-abedini, p. 419.

Khosravi has surveyed all the files of the books (20313 in total) that were sent to the Office of Book Writing, the state apparatus responsible for screening books, from 1941 to 1978 to get the permission for their publishing. On the whole during this period, 26% of the literary books received approval 'conditional' to certain minor corrections (the highest rate in this type of censorship compared to other subjects), and 11% of them were rejected totally. The rejected books did not receive any written notification from the office.<sup>18</sup> Most of ethical censorship was related to literature and arts books.<sup>19</sup> The average detainment of each book in that office was 47 days.<sup>20</sup> Khosravi suggests the use of an appropriate method of censorship in Iran after the Islamic Revolution: avoidance of any screening before the publication of books.<sup>21</sup>

### **3. Censorship After the Islamic Revolution**

The Islamic Revolution Council of Iran<sup>22</sup> ratified the first Press Law of the Islamic Republic after the revolution (and in fact the fourth Press Law in Iran) on 9<sup>th</sup> August 1979, six months after the victory of the Islamic Revolution. When this law was ratified, the Islamic Republic of Iran still had no constitutional law; therefore, this law was not based on the constitutional law so as to expound and interpret a constitutional principle, but it was a response to the anarchy prevalent in the situation of the press at that time and a way to supervise the printing and publishing of numerous and various publications

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<sup>18</sup> See Khosravi, pp. 178–79.

<sup>19</sup> See Mir-abadini, p. 205.

<sup>20</sup> See Mir-abadini, p. 224.

<sup>21</sup> See Mir-abadini, p. 231.

<sup>22</sup> A decision-making council set up during the Revolution by Imam Khomeini to determine the course of the revolution that served as a substitute for the parliament before the new Constitutional law was finalised in a council of experts and approved in a referendum.

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that were printed and published without following any specific criteria throughout the country.<sup>23</sup> The third item ‘the Pahlavi dynasty’ was removed from the law. During the early years after the revolution, the publishers had to bring their books to be checked by the office in the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance for different reasons, particularly in order to observe the law.

When the system was completely established, the said Ministry tried to alleviate the problem of delay made at the Office of Printing and Publishing Books due to the huge number of books that were to be monitored by adopting a lenient policy of screening. For a few years (particularly after the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-88) those in charge of book publishing affairs in the Ministry of Culture did not believe in the screening of books before their publication and considered it as contrary to the practice known in the modern world. The publishers printed and published their books without any outward censorship, but there was one condition: they had to observe the press law. This means that the judiciary system may prosecute them if they violate the law and in case any complaint is raised against them.

This system seems to be effective. There have been few cases where a publisher broke the law or the accepted social norms. One might say that publishers themselves, instead of the government, censor what they are going to publish -that is, there exists some sort of self regulation or self-censorship- because they do not want to waste their time and money or to face court trials.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, people supervise the contents of novels through their judgements based on the acceptable social norms that have been codified as the Press Law.

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<sup>23</sup> See ‘*Moshābehāt-hā-ye Nāgozīr-e Matbū‘āt-e Ghoghāgar-e Dīrūz va ‘Emrūz*’ [‘The Inevitable Similarities of the Past and Present “Hue and Cry” Press’], *Sobh*, 103 (1999), 12–15.

<sup>24</sup> ‘A research taken place during the years 1979 to 1986 in Iran indicates that the phenomenon of self-censorship existed in the press and some mentioned “concern about the consequences of publishing their information” as its cause.’ (Khosravi, p. 72. My translation)

Sometimes it is some ‘revolutionary’<sup>25</sup> people, particularly from religious lower classes, who complain against the publication of a ‘promiscuous’<sup>26</sup> book. It seems that the ‘revolutionary’ people are more sensitive and find out violations of the press law before the authorities and react to them more strictly than the authorities.

A rare example is discussed here to illustrate people’s reaction. On 30 July, 1995, *Sobh* magazine reported the publication of a ‘commonplace’ book that was ‘contemptuous toward religious values and the holy defence [i.e., in the Iran-Iraq War]’ and ‘full of scenes of killings and murder and description of obscene sex acts’ by the Morgh-e Āmin Publishers that had received permission for its publication from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.<sup>27</sup> Religious dignitaries complained against the cultural situation that tended to be anti-Islamic and pointed to that book as evidence. However, the bookshop was set ablaze in September and the perpetrators were not identified.<sup>28</sup> The

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<sup>25</sup> Their opponents (in Iran) may prefer to call them ‘pressure groups’ that they claim to have affiliations with the ‘conservatives’, but they themselves prefer the proper name ‘*Hizbullāh*’ (‘the members of the Party of Allah’) by which they partially mean they reject any partisan affiliation with any political parties whatsoever. They also mean they want to be practising Muslims and obey God’s orders. They are always ready to hold demonstrations and shout slogans in support of (the values of) the Islamic Revolution and to take part in struggles against anti-revolutionaries and anti-revolutionary activities. For example, they went to the war fronts as *basesejis* (volunteers) to fight against Iraqi troops. The western media usually describe them with the general pejorative term ‘fundamentalists’ that ignores/distorts some of their characteristics. A true understanding of the concept of ‘*Ummat-e Hizbullāh*’ (‘the nation of the Party of Allah’) that has been exported and extended to Lebanon and Palestine as well seems necessary in order to follow up tendencies and developments in Iran after the revolution. ‘*Ummat-e Hizbullāh*’ provides the dynamic force for the advance and preservation of the revolution.

<sup>26</sup> This term refers to description of obscene sex acts and violation of public indecency.

<sup>27</sup> ‘*Chāp va ‘Enteshār-e Ketābhā-ye Mobtazal Hamchenān ‘Edāme Dārad*’ (‘The Printing and Publishing of Banal books Still Continues’), *Sobh*, 16 (1995), p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> The U.S.-backed groups might have been involved in that incident.

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*Kayhan* newspaper (published in London) blamed *Sobh* magazine and a distinguished clergyman for the incident.

With time, this incident led to a general dissatisfaction among *Hizbullāhī*<sup>29</sup> people with the lenient policies of the Ministry. Thousands demonstrated against ‘dissemination of cultural banality’ and gathered in front of the publisher’s bookshop and demanded that the authorities of the Ministry deal severely with those publishers that publish ‘commonplace’ works. Finally in February 1995 the relevant deputy minister and the general director were changed under the pressure of people’s demonstrations and complaints, and the Ministry changed its policies.

At present, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance gives permission to publish books according to the code, ‘the objectives and criteria of publishing books’, ratified by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution in 1997. This code obliges the government to prevent the publication of any books whose content violates the following criteria:

- (1) Propagation and dissemination of atheism (blasphemy) and rejection of the principles of the faith,
- (2) Dissemination of lewdness and ethical corruption,
- (3) Instigation of the society to revolt against the Islamic Republic system of Iran and opposition to it,
- (4) Propagation and dissemination of the doctrines of unlawful and *mohāreb* (‘fighting against the Islamic system’ or ‘resisting armed’) groups as well as *zālle* (‘misguiding’, ‘erroneous’, or ‘astray’) groups,
- (5) Creation of turmoil and clashes among ethnic and religious groups, and

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<sup>29</sup> A certain influential group of religious people who constitute the combatant force of the revolution and set the dominant social norms after the revolution. They support the Islamic Revolution and promote its values.

- (6) Derision and weakening of national pride and the spirit of ‘love-for-homeland’<sup>30</sup>, causing a disposition (spirit) of alienation towards western or eastern culture and civilisation and colonial systems, and the propagation of dependence on any world powers and opposition to the policy and insight seeking to preserve independence.<sup>31</sup>

The major taboos are pornographic pictures or unethical descriptions, support for communism, monarchy (by the elements of the previous regime), or imperialism (‘the arrogant powers of the world’, i.e., Israel and the US); that is, they are not tolerated. Sanctities are observation of public decency, Islamic axiomatic precepts and great leaders of Islam, national unity and the territorial integrity, and avoidance of publication of classified (confidential) information. However, the details are not clear in practice and this is the cause of disturbances. Reza Sarshar, a novelist and the secretary of Iran’s Pen Association describes the publishers’ concern in respect to the problems arising from the Ministry’s Office of Printing and Publishing Books (in charge of screening) as follows:

The [publishers’] concern mainly arises from the law’s lack of exactness and impracticality and its incorrect execution. That is, firstly the present law is very general and interpretable [in different ways]. Consequently, it allows its administrators to interpret it, as they like, in many respects and to use (or misuse) it according to their own personal likes and dislikes. Moreover, the publishers’ and authors’ lack of knowledge of the contents of the law contributes to this problem. On the other hand, care is not often taken in the appointment of authorities in charge of the book publishing section.

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<sup>30</sup> This phrase has been used to avoid the term ‘nationalism’ that carries some western cultural load.

<sup>31</sup> *Kayhan* Daily, 16631. (1999, October 16), p. 14. (My translation)

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(Indeed, most learned, tolerant, broad-minded, and pious persons should take charge of this important task.) This contributes to the creation of the grounds for the misuse of the law.<sup>32</sup>

The lack of clarity gives the Office of Printing and Publishing Books an option to decide what is and what is not allowed. This task is very sensitive in the socio-political context of Iran and has sometimes been quite controversial. Taking a policy of extreme strictness or leniency in dealing with book screening has proved to be problematic for the authorities.

Ayatollah Khamenei, the spiritual leader of Iran, summarised the Islamic Republic's policies and norms regarding the screening of cultural production in a lecture addressed to dozens of Iranian publishers on February 5, 1999. Although Iran is 'receptive to opposition ideologies and allows publication of those ideologies', it opposes (1) any materials 'undermining the system' or attempting to 'infiltrate the pillars of the Islamic system of government', and (2) 'unethical works of art' that 'have ruinous ethical effects' and seek 'certain freedoms such as 'sexual freedom and the freedom to commit sin', materials that lead the youth 'astray and to corruption'. He believes that is upon the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance as well as publishers themselves to screen works of art.<sup>33</sup>

Here an example is provided to illustrate how a censored novel is looked at from the Iranian socio-political point of view:

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<sup>32</sup> *Kayhan* Daily, 16645. (1999, October 30), p. 9. (My translation)

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.irna.com/newshtm/eng/28215407.htm> A copy of Ayatollah Khamenei's lecture is provided in the appendix.

A leaning toward banality and solecism is a feature of the westernised<sup>34</sup> artists. They do not recognise any ethical and religious limits for their activities, and consider it their duty to display the humans' animalistic characteristics. What they instil into their addressees' mind as story represents their ideal society such as nudity, promiscuousness, homosexuality, lewdness up to the point of madness, drug addiction, etc. In order to observe 'the sanctity of the pen' [i.e., euphemism], we provide just some small [not so harsh] portions and examples below.

The periodical *Adineh*, no. 132–133, published Manoochehr Badi'ei's essay on Edmond Wilson's book, *A Survey of James Joyce's Ulysses*. This work, which was not permitted [in Iran] to be printed, contains lovemaking themes in which the body members were apparently mentioned in all the examples [i.e., scenes?]. It is the story of a woman called Molly Bloom and a man called Michael Robarts, in this story the woman offers herself to every one.<sup>35</sup>

It is noteworthy to say that James Joyce's works, which are now regarded as masterpieces, were also considered obscene, and banned at the beginning in its Christian cultural context.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> The term 'westernised' has a very negative connotation in Iran, particularly after the Islamic Revolution. It refers to the alienated dependent intellectuals who have rejected their original Islamic culture and embraced the Western culture with all its 'filth'. However, it does not imply that *all* Western art equals banality and filth and hence is unworthy of reading.

<sup>35</sup> 'Tarvij-e Fesād va Fahshā dar Matbū'āt' ('Dissemination of Corruption and Lewdness in the Press'), *Sobh*, 100 (1999), pp. 5, 22. (My translation)

<sup>36</sup> For instance, when *Ulysses* appeared, it was banned in Ireland, because the Catholic Church could not tolerate it. It was also banned in December 1920 while the American *Little Review* was publishing episodes from it.



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Moral censure has become a feature of Iranian life since 1979. A ‘notorious’<sup>37</sup> author, Simin Behbahani, whose books, particularly her poems, have usually been censored, was asked by the ‘anti-revolutionary’ *Kayhan* newspaper (published in London) to comment on the performance of the Office of Printing and Publishing Books (in charge of screening books) regarding her books. She compared the types of censorship before and after the revolution as follows:

I have always had problems with the censoring apparatus [i.e., the Office of Printing and Publishing Books], but the cases and the matters involved have been dissimilar at different times. For example, in the past period, a severe censorship was exerted concerning [issues related to] the monarchy and the royal family and political ideas and beliefs, but in the age of the revolution they use strictures concerning [violation of] religious issues, decency considerations and women’s modest covering. Of course, concerning the same issues, they have dealt sometimes very strictly and at other times more leniently.<sup>38</sup>

In an interview with Safdar Taqizadeh, a famous prose translator, Mahdi Afshar asks him about his approach toward ‘censorship’:

If you face a text that does not correspond to the Islamic Republic [of Iran]’s norms and criteria and you yourself, too, feel that it does not so much conform to our culture, how would you treat the problem? For example, would you put three dots [‘...’] in place of some words [i.e., the

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<sup>37</sup> ‘Notorious’ since she is usually willingly and knowingly violates public decency and moral values perhaps to test the threshold of the tolerance of the Islamic Government. She often opposes the screening of her books and confronts the screening officials.

<sup>38</sup> ‘*Tafāvot-e Momayezī Ketāb dar Qabl va Ba’d ‘az ‘Enqelāb*’ (The Difference of Book Screening before and after the Revolution’), *Sobh*, 65 (1996), p. 7. (My translation)

customary method of ‘bowdlerisation’<sup>39</sup>] or would you try to cover up the concept in an obscure disguise [i.e., ‘euphemism’], or how would you treat such problems?

Safdar Taqizadeh provides a detailed answer to his question as follows:

This question has several aspects: (1) the problem is related to a whole text or book, (2) a few words or probably some paragraphs need to be corrected, changed, or omitted, and (3) the text of the book is not faulty from the viewpoint of the translator, but he or she is compelled to make some alterations in it. As concerning the first type, I would not turn to problematic books in the present state of affairs and conditions; I would refrain from trying to print and publish such books until the conditions become favourable for their printing. In respect to the second type, where a word or paragraph needs alterations or omission, primarily I would resist [and insist on keeping them unaltered] especially when I see the omission of a word or sentence would damage the whole work, I would not be ready to omit it. Of course, in the translation of *Strange Pilgrims* [twelve stories written by Gabriel García Márquez] I was compelled to make a few slight alterations concerning the structure of the sentence in order to remove the obstacles of printing and publishing it. Such cases [of slight alterations], I think, would not damage the context and structure of the story. However, if a text is not faulty in my own viewpoint, and they compel me to cover up some matters in obscure disguise [i.e., euphemistic language] or omit or alter some bits of the text, I would dispense with it altogether or put it aside

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<sup>39</sup> The word ‘bowdlerize’, current by 1838 as a synonym for expurgate, was coined after the famous statement made by Thomas Bowdler (1754–1825) that ‘if any word or expression is of such a nature that the first impression which it excites is an impression of obscenity, that word ought not to be spoken, or written, or printed, it ought to be erased.’ (See Hermans, *Translation in Systems*, p. 86)

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half-finished since I believe that such a text is not faulty according to morals and other issues and I think the state of affairs in printing books will not persist as it is at the present time.<sup>40</sup>

As it is clear from Safdar Taqizadeh's remarks about censorship, this is a process based on dialogic relationship between the translator and the censoring apparatus. That is, the translator himself or herself monitors texts and resorts to censorial measures even before encountering the state apparatus, perhaps as not to cause delays in printing and publishing the translated text due to disagreement with the censor. This is a self-imposed censorship or 'self-censorship'. The situation in Iran today concerning self-censorship and a compromise between creators and censors reminds one of Miklós Haraszti's ironic remarks,

Traditional censorship presupposes the inherent opposition of creators and censors; the new censorship strives to eliminate this antagonism. The artist and the censor (...) diligently and cheerfully cultivate the gardens of art together. This new culture is the result not of raging censorship but of its steady disappearance. Censorship professes itself to be freedom because it acts, like morality, as the common spirit of both the rulers and the ruled.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, because of the fluctuations in the Ministry of Culture's policies of censorship, that coincide with a change in the censors' attitudes towards appropriate norms or simply with a change of censors themselves, translators sometimes translate whatever text they like and wait till the conditions are favourable for the publication of the text.

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<sup>40</sup> 'Interview with Safdar Taqizadeh', pp. 179–180.

<sup>41</sup> Miklós Haraszti, *The Velvet Prison: Artists under State Socialism*, trans. by Katalin and Stephen Landesmann (New York: Basic Books, 1987), p. 7–8.

Sometimes it is not the government that monitors the texts, but the editors or publishers have their own preferences as well. An example may clarify the point here:

I remember once I translated a Hemingway short story into Persian and sent it to the *Sadaf* magazine. *Sadaf* was a literary magazine that had two different periods. The chief editor of the first period who is one of our famous authors and translators himself did not publish the story, and in a private session he prohibited me from translating such ‘contaminated’ works. He did not see any ‘message for people’ in the story, and the story had no ‘rise and fall’ and was not ‘progressive’, and as a result, it would not ‘attract interest’. After a while, the authorities of the magazine changed, and a new chief editor took charge and published the same story, *Cat in the Rain*. I mean there were some ‘ideological’ differences and issues involved as well that obstructed innovations and would not let us get familiar with the new literary forms of the western world.<sup>42</sup>

The above quotation indicates the existence of ‘editorial censorship’ based on the ideologies of the editors and publishing houses.

Recently two authors’ associations have started their activities. ‘The first post-revolution association of Iranian writers, translators, poets, and researchers under the title of “*Iran’s Pen Association*” [*Anjoman-e Qalam-e Iran*] started its activities as of May 26, 1999.’ This association that acquired official permission from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance said in an announcement that it would be active as ‘an independent association’ and that the goal of the association is ‘to defend freedom of speech and thoughts

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<sup>42</sup> ‘Interview with Safdar Taqizadeh’, pp. 165–166. It is not clear when the incident happened, either before or after the revolution.

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within the framework of Islam and the constitution'.<sup>43</sup> Its members support the Islamic Revolution. Reza Sarshar (Rahgozar), a novelist, was chosen as the secretary of the Association. The other one is *Kānūn-e Nevīsandegān-e Iran* ('The Iranian Authors' Centre'), that held its first general meeting on November 25, 1999 and chose 5 members as its secretarial board.<sup>44</sup> Most of its members are known for their secular positions and anti-Islamic or anti-revolutionary remarks, and the association describes itself as the 'independent and democratic' centre for Iranian authors.

Nowadays, there is a vigorous tendency towards a plurality of views in Iran, but at the same time, there is an unwillingness to compromise.

In summary Persian translators, more or less like authors, usually are faced with some norms and models of text production, such as the impact of censorial measures, the choice of vocabulary, the style of language, the impact of anti-Arabism on the Persian spelling and script as well as cultural expectation, towards which they take positions and show certain leanings.

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<sup>43</sup> <http://www.irna.com/newshtm/eng/12110132.htm> a copy of which is provided in the appendix.

<sup>44</sup> It is said that the establishment of the centre is a result of the activities of the German Embassy in Iran. *Sobh* magazine quoted a *Die Welt*'s article written by Peter Schute claiming that 'the establishment of the Iranian Authors' Centre was the result of the activities of Kurt Scharff, the German cultural attaché in Iran. He invited the opposition authors to gather in his embassy residence in the autumn of 1979 before the victory of the revolution for discussion, and this led to the establishment of the first free and independent authors' association in the history of Iran. According to this paper, the association could remain active for two years after the revolution, but then it was banned. Now the Iranian authors struggle to gain permission for renewal of their activities.' ('*Kānūn-e Nevīsandegān Hāsel-e Talāsh-hā-ye Sefārat-e Alman dar Tehran Būde 'Ast*' ('The Authors' Centre Has Been a Result of the Activities of the German Embassy in Iran'), *Sobh*, 90 (1999), p. 5.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Based on this historical investigation, we may conclude the following generalizations:

1. There have been a fixed set of criteria in Iran that have been the basis of text screening by the governments. These criteria are related to sanctities: (1) the dominant regime, (2) the state's entity, (3) Islam, (3) public decency. Whatever text that 'tends' to undermine and endanger these sanctities have been censored.
2. The major types of censorship, thus, have been political, religious and moral. Economic and technological censorship were not so serious in Iran except recently!
3. Censorship has been more rigorous and severe at certain times, notably during socio-political crises when the government was concerned with opposition's activities.
4. The central government has not always been in charge of screening the texts. At certain times, the colonial powers were directly dominant in Iran, for instance during and after the WW1 and WW2. They imposed their own criteria at those times.
5. Most authors and translators seem to agree on the screening regulations, but they have mainly spoken out against the vague interpretation of these regulations and discriminatory performance.

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## **Appendix 1: Ayatollah Khamenei's address to the publishers**

thr 068

Leader-publishers

- Leader receives dozens of Iranian publishers

Tehran, may 18, irna -- the leader of the islamic revolution, ayatollah seyed-ali khamenei, in a meeting with a group of Iranian publishers said the Islamic republic is in principle receptive to opposition ideologies and allows publication of those ideologies because once wrong ideas are published, the proper ideology will markedly stand out from the wrong ideas.

He said: "the enemy is trying to attack the political system in the Islamic republic with the aid of cultural devices. to publish ideas and ideas that have a certain orientation and are part of a framework for undermining the system is harmful because the persons behind those ideas do not solely seek to offer a mere idea or a philosophical or political thought and they may be knowingly or unknowingly pursuing a plot for sabotage and subversion.

Publication and dissemination of unethical works of art is another aspect of a negative cultural work which will have immediate effect. That sector of works of art which have ruinous ethical effects will have to be prevented; this prevention is the necessary screening practice. Therefore, Islamic agencies, as well as the ministry of Islamic guidance and publishers must be wary lest they will lose sight of that goal.

Certainly, the Islamic republic is opposed to certain ruinous freedoms such as sexual freedom and the freedom to commit sin, and it will not allow the young generation of the state to be exposed to ruinous effects of those things in the area of culture and arts. it will not allow the youth to be led astray and to corruption. Therefore, the system is sensitive to the issue of the print media, books and publishing only from that angle.

Freedom of thought and academic freedoms were among the earliest slogans of the Islamic revolution. Since a long time ago a cultural and political move has

started by the opponents of Islam and the system with the idea of leaving its mark on the minds of the people in the area of ethics and public faith. Today, there is a stronger movement towards that direction, but with the grace of god, the Islamic system will stand firmly against that movement.

The next step of the opponents of the Islamic system is to infiltrate the pillars of the Islamic system of government. The fuss about 'advisory supervision' is nonsensical and unfounded, and is done with the idea to weaken the guardian council and with the idea of paving the way for the presence in the legislative organs of the state of people opposed to Islam. That is what they once did {during the monarchy} to the leading alims, and they think today, too, they can do the same thing to the Guardians Council. But they judge amiss for that will certainly not happen.

The pillars of the state's political system are very robust. The administrators of the government and especially the ministry of culture and Islamic guidance should not fear the fuss of the likelihood of their being accused of opposition with freedoms. You must know that even if you offer the highest levels of freedoms and at the same time be loyal to your principles" the propaganda elements of the enemy will nonetheless describe you as being opposed to freedoms.

It is not logical for us to remove all legislative obstacles to satellite (television) already on the presumption that satellite technology will advance even further in the coming years. That would be an act of culture shock. Rather than doing that, we must explore possible alternatives to preventing satellite impact. Therefore, the ban against satellite television which was adopted by the majlis is a proper law, and alongside with that law we should also supply the means for keeping the minds of our youth immune (to unislamic satellite culture)."

The leader of the Islamic Revolution addressed himself to the administrators with the three branches- of the government in that respect saying for the time being the nation is at a very crucial juncture, and that the task of addressing the

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needs of the youth and their protection against unislamic culture is the first priority for the government.

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**Appendix 2: The Establishment of Anjoman-e Qalam-e Iran ('Iran's Pen Association 1**

<http://www.irna.com/newshtm/el>

thr 019

Association-Pen

- Iran's Pen Association starts activities

Tehran, June 2, irna -- the first post-revolution association of Iranian writers, translators, poets and researchers under the title of 'Iran pen association' started its activities as of may 26.

The association which has acquired official permission from the Culture and Islamic Guidance Ministry said in an announcement that it will be active as an independent association with no attachment to any specific political grouping or faction.

Mohammad reza sarshar (rahgozar), spokesman and a founding member of the association, said the goal behind founding the association is to defend freedom of expression and thoughts within the framework of Islam and the constitution and support material and moral rights of the creators of literary works in an effort to remove existing irregularities.

He said that the association has been formed through the efforts of 19 iranian authors, translators, poets and researchers, adding that all those with at least one

valuable literary work and with commitment to the constitution, belief in a divine religion and no bad record can become member of the association.

However, he said there was nothing wrong with political inclinations of members of the association provided that the political group they support is officially recognized.

Sarshar said that the first general assembly of the association will meet in late summer this year following which members of the presiding board will be elected for a period of two years and three inspectors for one year.

He further added that financial resources of the association will be supplied through members, arrangement of profit making cultural programs, participation in economic activities not banned by the association's regulations and contributions of other institutions.

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