



What to read during a pandemic: A case study of 'book promotion politics' in Iran

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Book promotion
COVID-19 pandemic
Iran
Iranian news websites
Politicisation of reading
Reading suggestions

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted almost every aspect of life. According to data from several countries, book reading has surged since the beginning of the imposed lockdowns. This situation has presented cultural mediators with an unprecedented opportunity to influence their audiences' reading habits. The current study reports the results of a qualitative analysis of Iranian news websites' book suggestions during March 2020, the peak of the first wave of COVID-19 in Iran. Through analysing the suggested books' original language, publication date, genre, and publisher, the study uncovers some of the politics of book promotion in Iran. The findings revealed a high level of homogeneity among the reading suggestions in terms of original language, genre, and publishers, raising the possibility that wider government policies encourage the promotion or marginalisation of certain types of books. Fiction and nonfiction books about the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) dominated the suggestions, while comedy and nonpolitical mystery/thrillers were almost nonexistent. These findings and more are discussed in light of the sociopolitical context in Iran.

1. Introduction

With its first cases appearing in China in late 2019, COVID-19 spread around the world in a matter of months. By early 2020, almost all countries had reported positive cases, some more than others. In the early stages of the pandemic, Iran was amongst the hardest hit countries. Almost 1.5 million Iranians had contracted the Coronavirus by January 2021 (Center for Systems Science and Engineering, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic and its side effects are being studied from different perspectives. Studies on the economic and psychological impacts of the pandemic have commenced in full force (e.g. Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Atkeson, 2020). Research has also begun on the media coverage of COVID-19, most of which deals with misinformation surrounding the pandemic (e.g. Cinelli et al., 2020; Kouzy et al., 2020).

Scrolling through some Iranian websites in mid-March 2020, I noticed an unusually high volume of articles offering music, movie, and book suggestions. Of most interest were the offered reading lists. These websites seemed to have taken a more proactive approach to book promotion since the beginning of the pandemic. While the reasons for this change in approach are not clear, it is generally believed that book-reading will grow as people find more free time during the imposed lockdowns. Also, the 'escapism' and 'relaxation' functions of book-reading can assist readers in coping with the impact of negative news.

This situation offers an unprecedented opportunity for media platforms to contribute to shaping their audiences' reading habits.

Recent lockdowns in many countries have also changed the reality in which reading takes place. As Allington and Swann (2009) state, the words on the page cannot be separated from the conditions under which literature is produced and consumed. This is a key point in discussing book-reading during the current pandemic. While individual circumstances have been shown to impact the way readers approach book-reading (Ooi, 2008), it remains to be seen how such an unprecedented collective experience can influence people's reading choices. Another area for investigation is the role played by cultural mediators in shaping long-term reading habits during such changing times. With an eye on the latter, this study presents the results of a qualitative analysis of the reading lists published by Iranian websites in March 2020, the peak of the first wave of COVID-19 in Iran. More specifically, the following research question guided the study:

- What are the main characteristics of the reading lists published by Iranian websites in March 2020?

The following features of the suggested books formed the focus of this analysis: Original language, publication date, type/genre, and publisher.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2021.100121>

Received 12 May 2020; Received in revised form 21 January 2021; Accepted 22 January 2021

Available online 3 February 2021

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1.1. Significance of the study

Previous research has analysed the book-related content of mass-circulated newspapers in Iran (e.g. Rahmani & Nooshinfard, 2015), but no study has focused solely on the content of reading suggestions by traditional or online Iranian media. This study will be the first to do so through its multifactorial analysis of a sample of Persian-language reading lists published online in March 2020. It combines the micro analysis of publication date, language, genre, and publisher for each of the recommended books with a macro analysis of the connections among these features, thereby revealing some of the intricacies of the cultural promotion landscape in Iran. Also, while some features of books, including theme and genre, have often lent themselves to ideological analyses, others have rarely been analysed as couriers of a broader ideological cause; this is another contribution of this study to the existing literature. The findings will be of relevance to researchers of the Iranian literary landscape as well as anyone interested in the intersection between media and cultural promotion. Despite its focus on the Iranian context, the study throws light on how books can be used by media outlets to carry forward a political or cultural ideology.

2. Background of the study

2.1. Publishing landscape in Iran

The Islamic revolution of 1979 significantly changed the dynamics of the Iranian society. Like many other groups, cultural stakeholders were directly influenced by these changes. In the immediate years following the revolution, many writers, directors, and artists were banned from working and some faced the revocation of their issued licenses (Rahimi, 2015). On the other hand, the government started providing significant financial and logistic support for the production and circulation of certain cultural products, including movies and books with Islamic and revolutionary themes. It is safe to assume that the eight-year Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), “known in Iran’s official discourse as the “Imposed War,” the “Sacred Defence,” or the “Holy Defence” (Ghandeharion & Tekiyeh, 2019), has had the longest-lasting impact on the country’s cultural production landscape (see section 4.4.2.1 for an extended discussion of Sacred Defence literature). Outside of a few exceptions (see Moosavi, 2020), published Sacred Defence writings are in line with the Iranian government’s discourse of the war, therefore supported extensively by government-funded publishers. However, the independent publishing sector is not to be overlooked in any discussion of the dynamics of the Iranian book sector.

According to the country’s official book sales data (Noorshamsi, 2019), some independent publishers such as Cheshmeh, Qoqnus, and Negah have managed to find large audiences in the last two decades. These publishers mostly rely on translated books for attracting educated middle-class Iranians, the most likely group to buy and read books. Apart from translations, they often publish the works of reputable Iranian authors who are not very popular with cultural authorities. Therefore, they hardly receive any state support and are likely to receive harsher penalties than government-supported publishers if they cross the explicit/implicit boundaries set by government bodies (see section 4.5). In this sense, book production can turn into a politically loaded activity with tangible consequences for all stakeholders. In fact, many aspects of life have been politicised in post-revolutionary Iran, including but not limited to population policy (Abbasi et al., 2002) and dress code (Zahedi, 2007). However, as Keshavarz (2007) notes, unidimensional views of the Iranian experience need to give way to more realistic accounts of life in post-revolution Iran, ones that portray the good, the bad, and the ugly.

2.2. Politicised reading suggestions

Following on from the previous discussion, it could be argued that book-reading and book promotion are not entirely apolitical either,

“That’s why books get banned, why the Nazis burned books, why school curriculums get censored” (Shunnarah, 2016). Adoni and Nossek (2013, p. 56) refer to book-reading as “a cultural behavior with a built-in paradox”: While it is perhaps “the most individual and lonely cultural activity, demanding the deepest and best of human emotional and cognitive faculties, ...Sharing similar literary tastes and texts contributes to individuals’ identification with and integration within social groups”. Some sections of society may even make political statements through their collective reading choices. These choices will attract more attention if they occur in response to suggestions by a political or otherwise well-known figure. In Iran, examples of this type of collective reading behaviour abound.

One of the most well-known examples occurred in September 2011, when thousands of copies of the Persian translation of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *News of a Kidnapping* were sold in a single day. This was just after the news came out that Mir Hossein Mousavi, the detained 2009 presidential candidate, has encouraged his daughters to read this book if they wanted to know about his situation in captivity (Kamali Dehghan, 2011). In addition to the sellout of its physical copies, online copies of the book were downloaded in the thousands and Iranians began sharing quotes from the book in messaging apps. While this was a one-off instance, book suggestions by Iran’s supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, have become a mainstay in the country’s book-reading landscape.

Commendations by the leader, known in official Iranian media as *Taqriz*,¹ have had a notable impact on the reading choices of certain sections of the Iranian society in the last 20 years. By mid-2019, he had commended 57 books, almost all of which became bestsellers in subsequent years if not months. The success story of the Persian translation of Roger Martin du Gard’s *The Thibaults* is a recent example. In a visit to Tehran International Book Fair in April 2018, Khamenei recalled his conversation with Abolhassan Najafi, the translator of this book into Persian, and said “May God bless Mr Abolhassan Najafi. *The Thibaults* was a very good novel which did not receive the fame it deserved in Iran” (Eghtesad Online, 2018). This comment was enough to boost the sales of this four-volume book. In mid-2019, Niloofar Publishing House reported the sellout of the first six reprints of all the volumes of *The Thibaults*. The same fate awaited *Sarbāz-e Kučak-e Emām*, a memoir of an Iranian prisoner of war first published in 2013 and reprinted only six times up to 2018. “Following the leader’s commendation in February 2018, it has now reached its 83rd reprint” (Research Deputy of Payam-e Azadegan Cultural Institute, 27 Feb 2020).

These examples represent the extreme end of the endorsement spectrum, both in terms of the endorsers’ status and the impact of their endorsements on the actual book-reading behaviours of the Iranian audience. There are, however, everyday online platforms which play an important role in connecting potential readers to books through publishing reading lists, author interviews, and book reviews. This mediation role becomes more important in countries like Iran, where manuscripts submitted for publication must pass the scrutiny from cultural authorities before receiving publication permission. According to Khoshsaligheh et al. (2020, p. 85), “The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance acts as a watchdog agency in Iran, controlling and monitoring the publication of cultural products, including translated books”. This process usually prevents the publication of books that challenge the mainstream state ideology, be it political, religious, cultural, or even philosophical. Surprisingly, the grant of a publication permission from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) does not guarantee a book’s undisturbed circulation in the marketplace, because vigilante forces have had a history of taking down movies or stopping the republication of

¹ The UN-approved Broad Transcription System (2012) has been used for romanising Persian words in this article. A full description of this system is available at https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/docs/10th-uncsgn-docs/econf/E_CONF.101_118_Rev.1_Transcription%20symbols%20for%20Persian_Updated.pdf.

books (Mahloujian, 2002; Rahimi, 2015).² In this environment, greater importance is attached to book recommendations as a means of reinforcing or challenging state-supported literature.

2.3. Book sector during the COVID-19 pandemic

Notwithstanding its negative impact on some stakeholders, especially brick-and-mortar booksellers, the pandemic may have a silver lining for the book industry in the form of increased book-reading. According to the president of the International Publishers Association, “Self-isolation around the world has seen a boom in reading”, which is “the ideal way of escaping our four walls” (Charlton, 2020). Business-wise, IBIS Australia has listed the Book Stores industry as one of those “set to outperform due to COVID-19” (IBIS World, 2020). Due to the current restrictions on physical bookselling, online sales are expected to account for most of this increase. In late March 2020, Waterstones, UK’s biggest book chain, reported a 400% increase in its online sales over a one-week period and “a significant uplift on classic titles including Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Love in the Time of Cholera*” (Flood, 2020).

In Iran, the MCIG reported the sale of over 236 thousand eBook copies during a national book-reading campaign from 21 March to 9 April 2020. However, the pandemic took its toll on the book sector through the postponement of the 2020 Tehran International Book Fair (TIBF), among others. TIBF has traditionally helped Iranian publishers make up for low sales in other seasons. In 2011, it attracted over five million visitors, 8% of Iran’s population at the time (Bagheri, 2012). The postponement of such book-related events has added to the importance of book suggestions for bridging the gap between publishers and readers.

3. Sample of the study

To find the Persian-language reading lists published in March 2020 by Iranian websites, I used the following search keywords:

- *Ketābhāyi Barā-ye Dowrān-e Qarantine* (Books for the quarantine period)
- *Ketābxāni + Kovid-19* (Book-reading + COVID-19)
- *Pīnahād-e Ketāb Barā-ye Dowrān-e Qarantine* (Book suggestions for the quarantine period)
- *Ketāb-e Pīnahādi Barā-ye Dowrān-e Koronā* (Book suggestions for Coronavirus lockdowns)
- *List-e Ketāb + Koronā* (Book list + Coronavirus)

The search process lasted for one week in late March 2020. Using Google’s ‘Advanced Search’ page, I limited the results to ‘Persian only’ and selected ‘up to a one month ago’ as the ‘last update’. This was aimed to account for the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the types of books recommended by these online outlets. Most search terms returned 10 to 15 pages of non-repeating results, many of which were replications of a single source article. For a reading list to be included in the sample, it had to satisfy the following criteria:

1. Contain a list of three or more recommended books
2. Published by an Iranian website in March 2020

The final sample comprised 15 distinct reading lists (Appendix A) published by ten Iranian news outlets in March 2020. The search process was designed to find as many reading lists as possible, regardless of the publication platform. All the selected lists were published in the Arts and

Culture section of the corresponding websites. Eight of them were compiled by the websites’ editors, while the remaining seven were curated by writers, publishers, and journalists. The reading lists contain a total of 163 book titles, which is an average of 10.8 titles per list. Appendix B presents all the recommended titles alongside their original language, publication date, type/genre, and publisher. Before presenting the results, I will briefly discuss the political affiliations of the news outlets that published these reading lists. This general commentary can help contextualise the analyses that follows as well as feed into the discussion of findings.

3.1. Political affiliations of the news outlets

Over half of the news outlets in this sample are affiliated with a government or government-supported organisation in Iran and almost all of them have fundamentalist political leanings. Representing the extreme end of the fundamentalist spectrum, Tasnim News Agency and Raja News are affiliated with the cultural sectors of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Popular Mobilization Forces, respectively. Hawzah News Agency aims to satisfy “the need for round the clock news coverage of [Islamic] seminary activities” and is “affiliated with the seminary school management centre” (About Us, Hawzah News Agency). Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), as the name suggests, is the official news outlet of the Iranian government and is fully funded by the MCIG. However, it cannot be indefinitely placed on the political spectrum because its leanings change with the government in power. Perhaps the only news outlet in this sample known for its reformist political leanings is Asr-e Iran. This political stance has been reflected in their reading lists, which will be discussed later in the article.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Little overlap among the recommended titles

The reading lists included in this sample contain a total of 163 entries. Distinct titles stand at 148, while 13 books were recommended by more than one source. Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* and Abbas Maroufi’s *Samfoni-ye Mordegān* were each recommended by three separate news websites. The eleven remaining books, each recommended by two websites, are as follows:

Persian-language books mentioned twice: *Kelidar*, *Česmhāyāš*, *Kešti-ye Pahlū Gerefteh*, *Nāmīrā*, *Vaḡti Mahtāb Gom Šod*, *Tanhā Zir-e Bārān*, *Naxl-o Naranj*, and *Owsane-ye Goharšād*.

Translated books mentioned twice: *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Le Petit Prince*, *Forty Rules of Love*.

The analysis revealed little overlap (only 9%) among the titles appearing on these reading lists. The fact that 148 of the entries are distinct titles, mostly Persian originals, is a significant finding. Among other things, it speaks to the current status of the Persian literary polysystem, which is one of ongoing transition. According to Even-Zohar (2010), one of the features of a transitioning literary polysystem is a continuous power struggle among different modes of writing for gaining a central position within the system. In such environment, stakeholders will attempt to reshape the literary canon based on their interests. With relation to the current sample of reading lists, this attempt is reflected in the high number of distinct recommended titles. One would have expected more overlap among the recommended titles if there were consensus regarding what should constitute the Persian literary canon. This argument will be further developed in Section 4.3 in relation to the publication dates of the recommended books.

4.2. Original language: Dominance of Persian originals

One of the main features of the selected reading lists is a strong focus on Persian-language books (Table 1).

As seen in Table 1, 105 (70.2%) of the 148 distinct titles in this sample

² A recent example of the later occurred in May 2019. Nine months after the publication of the Persian translations of Yuval Noah Harari’s *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* and *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, the MCIG announced the revoking of both books’ publication permissions, without explaining the reasons for doing so.

Table 1
Original languages of the suggested books.

Original language	Representatives in the sample
Persian	N = 105
English	N = 22
Russian	N = 6
French	N = 5
Arabic	N = 2
Spanish	N = 2
Turkish	N = 2
Czech	N = 1
Greek	N = 1
Italian	N = 1
Japanese	N = 1

are Persian originals, while 43 titles (29.8%) are Persian translations of foreign-language works. English is the source language of more than half of the foreign-language originals, which is not surprising given its hyper-central position in the world system of languages (Heilbron, 2000) and the high rate of translation from English into other languages. In addition, almost all the non-English foreign-language books in the sample have been translated into Persian via already-existing English translations, a process known as indirect or relay translation (Pas, 2017). Given the abundance of religious literature in the analysed reading lists and the long history of cultural exchange between Iran and the Arab world, I expected to see more Arabic originals in this sample. However, Arabic and Sanskrit *used to be* the main source languages for translation into Persian, only to be replaced by English, French, Russian, and Turkish during the reign of the Qajars in mid-19th century (Naji-Nasrabadi, 2001).

An important question here is whether these Persian-dominated reading lists *reinforce* or *challenge* Iranian readers' preferences in terms of original language. Noorshamsi (2019) discusses the data of bestselling books, authors, and publishers in Iran for the month of August 2018. Of most relevance to this section are bestselling categories and authors: "Foreign-language fiction topped the list of bestselling categories with over 63 thousand copies sold, followed by the Persian-language fiction category which sold 37 thousand copies". Sixteen of the 20 bestselling authors were from the foreign language category. Even more surprising is the appearance of only three Persian-language authors in the top 20 bestselling authors of children's literature, which is traditionally known to be dominated by local authors. This imbalance was "tackled" through "the provision of a blanket discount of 25% on Persian-language books, compared to only 15% on translated books" (Iranian Book News Agency, 2019), which is an instance of "government intervention in the market of cultural goods and services" through influencing the demand side of the market (Dalle Nogare & Bertacchini, 2015).

In response to the question posed earlier in this section, there is little doubt that the analysed reading lists *challenge* the documented preference of Iranian readers for translated literature, signalling an effort by these news outlets to promote homegrown literature. This effort is understandable given the country's negligent approach to copyright laws: "Iran has not joined any of the main international copyright agreements ... [which] means that the rights of foreign authors and copyright owners

are not protected in Iran" (Ayoubi, 2018, pp. 1–2). Therefore, Iranian publishers are not required by municipal law to purchase the publication rights of foreign-language books, which often results in the publication of multiple Persian translations for a single book (see Missaghi, 2015). This situation has created an imbalanced competition between Iranian and international writers in the Iranian book market, regardless of the quality of their literary productions. The tacit agreement between the MCIG and publishing houses about the imposition of less restrictions on the content of translated books compared to Persian originals exacerbates this imbalance.

4.3. Publication date: Absence of contemporary world literature

Table 2 presents a breakdown of the suggested titles based on their date of publication.

Books originally published between 2015 and 2019 are the most represented in the sample, followed by 2010–2014 and, surprisingly, the pre-1950 period. Persian-language originals and translated books were further compared in terms of publication dates (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 suggests an active promotion of foreign-language classics and contemporary Persian-language literature, while contemporary world literature and Persian-language classics are conspicuously underrepresented. Moreover, all the pre-1950 recommendations are foreign-language books. Twenty-nine (69%) of all the recommended foreign-language books were originally published in the 19th or 20th century, with only 14 titles (31%) published from 2000 onwards. This pattern peaks in the Iranian leader's reading suggestions published by Jahan News Agency. Except for *The Pleasures of Philosophy*, all his foreign-language recommendations were published in the 19th and early 20th century: *Les Misérables* (1862), *The Enchanted Soul* (1921), *Mahatma Gandhi* (1924), and *And Quiet Flows the Don* (1928).

This pattern echoes the selective approach to history in post-revolutionary Iran. The traces of this approach can be found in various facets of the Iranian society, including school and university curricula and media productions. With regards to literature, post-revolutionary cultural authorities have historically shown a preference for foreign-language classics over contemporary world literature. This may be because the latter is more likely to touch on current world affairs and therefore pose greater risk to the dominant state discourse, which is one of sticking to traditions. Although the recommendations of these news outlets cannot be taken as a direct reflection of the authorities' viewpoints, the websites' close affiliations to government agencies (see section 3.1) increases the likelihood of some correlation between the two.

In sharp contrast to translated titles, 80% of the Persian-language books suggested by these news outlets were published from 2000 onwards. Only four (3.8%) of the Persian originals were published before the 1979 revolution: *Kelidar*, *Češmhāyaš*, *Savusun*, and *Hamsāyehā*. The tiny share of pre-revolution literature in this sample is especially surprising given Iran's long and proud literary tradition, much of it owing to literature produced before 1979. Although this imbalance may partly result from disproportionate number of publications in post-revolution Iran, it speaks to a broader negligence of pre-revolution arts and literature amongst the country's official media outlets.

4.4. Type/genre

Of the 148 distinct titles suggested by these news outlets, 101 (68%) are works of fiction, while 47 (32%) are nonfiction (see Table 3). To further categorise the books based on their genre, I referred to each book's epitextual material. In the rare cases where no such information existed, Goodreads was consulted.³

³ A social cataloguing website where ordinary readers can share their reviews and comment on what genres they think a book belongs to.

Table 2
Publication dates of the suggested books.

Publication date	Representatives in the sample
Before 1950	N = 20
1950–1969	N = 3
1970–1989	N = 12
1990–1994	N = 7
1995–1999	N = 10
2000–2004	N = 10
2005–2009	N = 19
2010–2014	N = 23
2015–2019	N = 44

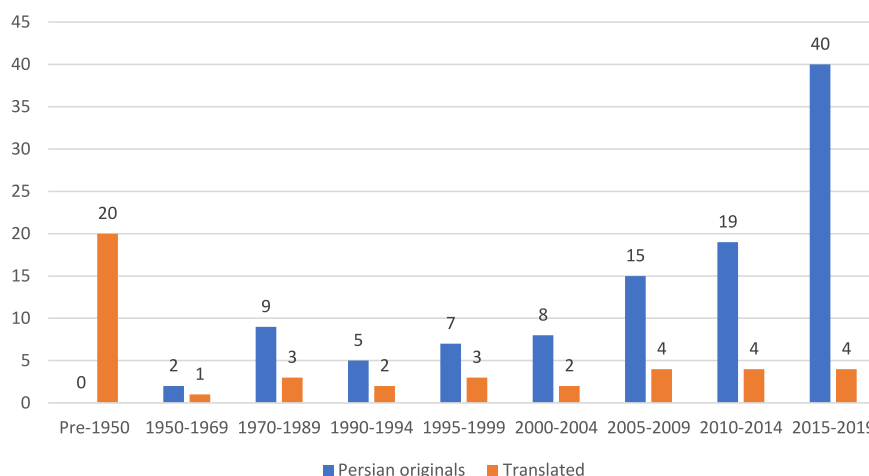


Fig. 1. Comparison of Persian originals and translated books in terms of publication date.

Table 3

Type and genre of the suggested books.

Type	Genre
Fiction (N = 101; 68%)	Historical fiction (n = 32) Classics (n = 15) General/Literary fiction (n = 14) Religious fiction (n = 12) Young adult fiction (8) Other (n = 20)
Nonfiction (N = 47; 32%)	Memoirs and biographies (n = 27) Political (n = 5) Religious (n = 5) Other (n = 10)

4.4.1. Fiction category

In the fiction category, historical fiction was the most frequent genre with 42 representatives. Historical fiction was further divided into general historical fiction (n = 28), Sacred Defence literature (n = 10), and Islamic revolution literature (n = 4). It was followed by classics (n = 15), general/literary fiction (n = 14), and religious fiction (n = 12) as the most common fiction genres in the sample.

4.4.1.1. Religious fiction. Almost all the suggested books in the religious fiction category deal with events and figures associated with Shi'a Islam. These range from a biographical novel (*Naxl-o Nāranj*) about the life and times of Sheykh Morteza Ansari, an influential figure in Shi'a jurisprudence, to the story of an American soldier who converted to Shi'a Islam while deployed in Iraq (*Seyyed-e Baghdād*). This is an important distinction to consider because Shi'ism has been "the reigning doctrine of the Islamic Republic of Iran embodied in the constitution, institutions, and politics" (Perry, 2010, p. 121). It logically follows that promoting the tenets of the Shi'a tradition is a priority for the Islamic Republic (see Shaery-Eisenlohr, 2004). The current sample of reading lists reflects that importance. Also noteworthy is the interconnection among religion, revolution, and Sacred Defence in the Iranian government's official discourse. According to Moosavi (2020, 159), "Many of the writers of Sacred Defense literature have been directly supported by, and in turn write in support of, the Islamic Republic of Iran's religio-nationalist narrative of the war", often framing the war "as a contemporary reenactment of the Battle of Karbala" and glorifying "acts of wartime martyrdom" (also see Ansari, 2012; and; Saramifar, 2018). These interconnections can explain the difficulty of categorising the recommended books into clear-cut genres.

Certain genres were underrepresented or non-existent in this sample

of reading lists, including comedy and nonpolitical mystery/thrillers. Given the chosen timeframe for the reading lists, the underrepresentation of these genres may suggest that the selected news websites were more interested in promoting their supported ideologies rather than providing 'escapism' for their audiences, although we now know that "Escapism is associated not only with light and entertaining reading but also with the reading of works that are considered serious quality literature, such as ... war stories" (Begum, 2011, p. 739).

4.4.2. Nonfiction category

As seen in Table 3, more than half (n = 27; 57.4%) of the books in the nonfiction category are memoirs and biographies, followed by books on religious (n = 5) and political (n = 5) topics. Twenty-two (81.5%) of the suggested memoirs and biographies have been narrated or written by individuals directly involved in the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988).

4.4.2.1. Sacred Defence literature. Official Iranian media use the term *Adabiyāt-e Defā'e Moqaddas* ('Sacred Defence Literature') to refer to literature about the Iran-Iraq War, which is also the term used throughout this article. Sacred Defence literature, especially memoirs and biographies, have experienced growing popularity among Iranian readers since the early 2000s, becoming "one of the mainstays of contemporary Iranian literature and bestselling entertainments" (Ghandeharion & Tekiyeh, 2019, p. 148). Multiple factors are likely to have contributed to this growing popularity, or more accurately put, *perceived* popularity, including the conditions for the publication, circulation, and promotion of this literary genre.

From a logistic standpoint, Sacred Defence literature has enjoyed a privileged position compared to other literary forms. The government-funded publishing houses which publish most Sacred Defence books are among the very few that have access to subsidised paper and can therefore afford publishing in large numbers, even if that comes at the cost of thousands of copies sitting in warehouses (see Bajoghli, 2019). Moreover, the Iranian government's efforts to promote Sacred Defence literature cannot be overstated. Laetitia Nanquette (2013) studied the conditions for the production and reception of one of the most commercially successful Sacred Defence memoirs in Iran: *Da*. She reported that "55 percent of the readers had at least heard about the book from various types of advertisements or seen it before reading it" (Nanquette, 2013, p. 947; also see Ghandeharion & Tekiyeh, 2019 for a relevant case study). This level of visibility is very rare in the Iranian book market and it goes to show the impact that government support has on the circulation and reception of cultural products. In addition to this privileged position, Sacred Defence books have benefited from a new

literary movement which attempts to look at the war from a humanistic perspective (Moosavi, 2020). Similar movements have gained momentum in other forms of Sacred Defence arts, including cinema (see Bajoghli, 2017).

The growing popularity of Sacred Defence literature has attracted the attention of literary scholars in Iran. The *Journal of Resistance Literature* was launched in 2009 at Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman, followed by the establishment of Shahed University's *Bi-quarterly Journal of Sacred Defence Literature* in 2017. Since 2012, several Iranian universities started offering master's degrees in resistance literature. Cultural authorities in Iran have also taken a proactive approach to the production and promotion of Sacred Defence literature. Speaking to the Iranian media in 2008, a former official of the Foundation for the Preservation and Publication of Sacred Defence Works and Values stated that "The publication of over 6000 books on Sacred Defence is far below our expectations", asking the MCIG "to increase their output of Sacred Defence literature" (Sacred Defense Books, 2008). The fact that a government-funded department is devoted to producing and promoting Sacred Defence literature shows the extent of state support for this literary form in Iran.

4.5. Publishers

The final analysed feature of the suggested books was their publishers. I only analysed the publishers of Persian-language books, because multiple Persian translations exist for some of the recommended foreign-language books and almost none of the news outlets had specified their preferred version. Overall, 38 publishers are represented in the selected sample. Twenty-five of those have only one representative, while 13 publishers have two or more representatives (see Fig. 2).

The two most represented publishers, Sureh-ye Mehr and Behnashr, are affiliated with *Howze-ye Honari-ye Sāzmān-e Tabliqāt-e Eslāmi* (Arts Division of the Islamic Development Organization) and *Astan-e Qods-e Razavi*, respectively. At the time of writing this article, all the other publishers in Fig. 2 were privately funded and managed. The significant gap between Sureh-ye Mehr and the other publishers is unmissable: It has almost four times the number of titles of its closest rival, Behnashr, and more titles than 28 other publishers combined. An administrator of Howze-ye Honari publications, Sureh-ye Mehr promotes itself as 'the best publisher of the ideas and arts of the Islamic revolution'. It has a clear focus on publishing books about the 1979 revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. According to the data available on their official website, Sureh-ye Mehr had published 2180 titles as of May 2020. Of those, 400 titles are categorised as 'Sacred Defence literature' and almost 200 titles fall under 'Islamic revolution literature'. In the reading lists analysed for this study, 19 (61%) of the titles published by Sureh-ye Mehr can be categorised as Sacred Defence literature, while the remaining 12 are a combination of

Islamic revolution literature and religious literature. These are the three sides of the triangle that Lob (2020) calls "the pillars of legitimacy for the state".

A question to be asked here is whether the analysed reading lists reflect the Iranian book market in terms of popular publishers. Data from the Ministry of Culture's 2019 Summer of Books Initiative can help answer this question. According to Noorshamsi (2019), Cheshmeh topped the list of bestselling publishers with over 12 thousand copies sold in two weeks, followed by Qoqnu, Negah, and Nilufar. With less than two thousand copies sold, Sureh-ye Mehr had barely made the list of top 20 publishers, standing at 19th. There is no sign of Behnashr and Neyestan on the list of bestselling publishers. Crosschecking these data with a few other sources (e.g. Alitalab, 2019; Bestseller Books, 2019) confirmed the unquestionable popularity of books published by Cheshmeh, Qoqnu, and Negah, and the limited readership for Sureh-ye Mehr and Behnashr's publications. This resembles Nanquette's (2013) assertion that state-supported publishers in Iran are not particularly concerned about sale figures, because the support they receive has little to do with their commercial performance.

5. Conclusions

This study was an attempt to analyse the reading lists published by Iranian websites in March 2020, the peak of the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic in Iran. Above all, I was interested in the original language, publication date, type/genre, and publishers of the suggested books. The types of books recommended in this sample and those favoured by Iranian readers differ significantly, especially in terms of original language and publisher. While translated books often outnumber Persian originals in Iran's bestseller charts, the reading lists analysed in this study are dominated by Persian-language books. Also overrepresented are books from two government-affiliated publishers, namely Sureh-ye Mehr and Behnashr, none of which have yet gained widespread popularity despite receiving generous financial and logistic support from cultural authorities.

Although each reading list was analysed separately, the findings uncovered an interesting coordination among them. The political leaning of the corresponding website was irrelevant in my decision to include a reading list, but it turned out that most of the lists that met the inclusion criteria were published by news outlets with a fundamentalist political standpoint. These agencies seemed to have taken an active approach to promoting the types of books they favour: Sacred Defence literature, Islamic revolution literature, and religious literature. However, as mentioned earlier in section 3.1, Asr-e Iran is the only news agency in this sample known for its reformist political leanings. Three reading lists by Asr-e Iran were included in this sample, each consisting of five suggested

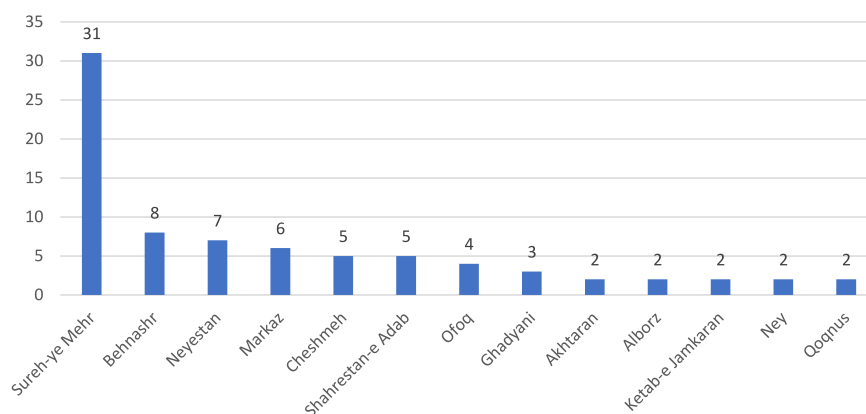


Fig. 2. Publishers with two or more books in the analysed reading lists.

titles. Only one of these 15 books belongs to the Sacred Defence category, which is unlike any other news outlet in the sample. Moreover, none of Asr-e Iran's recommendations were published by Sureh-ye Mehr, Beh-nashr, or Neyestan, the major government-funded publishers. On the flipside, they recommended three books by Cheshmeh Publishing House. Cheshmeh's operating license was revoked by Iran's MCIG in 2012, mainly due to a submission called *Ruz-e Hosein* which was believed to contain insults to Hussein ibn Ali, the third Shi'a Imam (Khabar Online, 2012). This decision was preceded by accusations from Iran's Soft Security Strategic Think Tank against Cheshmeh and several other publishing houses, claiming that they had made attempts "to overthrow the Islamic establishment" by publishing books which "led to the promotion of methods of soft revolution" (Esfandiari, 2011). The stark difference between the types of books suggested by Asr-e Iran and those by the other news outlets points to the politicised nature of book-reading and book promotion in Iran.

The analysed reading lists score low on theme and genre diversity. Books about the years leading up to the 1979 revolution and the Imposed War (1980–1988) dominate the sample. On the contrary, comedic genres have only one representative and nonpolitical mysteries/thrillers are almost absent from the sample. The analysis of publication dates revealed significant marginalisation of contemporary world literature and classic Persian literature. The homogeneity of this sample makes one ponder the possibility of the existence of wider policies for promoting or marginalising certain types of books in Iran. The activities of government-funded publishers in recent years strengthens this hypothesis (see section 4.5). Aside from reflecting the general policy to champion post-revolution arts, cinema, and literature, the reading lists might reflect a tendency to explore some fresh voices in Persian literature, both in terms of theme and genre. This tendency ties well, for instance, with the high proportion of Sacred Defence literature, a genre which came into existence just after the commencement of Iran-Iraq War in 1980.

While every effort was made to include all the Persian-language reading lists published in March 2020 by Iranian websites, some of those lists might have slipped under my radar. Future research can take a more targeted approach to selecting the sample of reading recommendations, ensuring the representation of websites with different political leanings. A longitudinal study of Iranian news outlets' cultural promotion strategies is also an interesting topic for future research. Such a study can not only include a more diverse sample of reading suggestions in terms of publication platform, it can also highlight the impact of notable political, economic, or social events on the approach of these outlets towards cultural promotion.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Mohsen Kafi: the sole author of this article and I have been responsible for all the stages of the research.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the anonymous reviewers and SSHO's editor for their invaluable feedback. I also wish to thank Dr. Nicola Gilmour and Dr. Mehri Irajad for commenting on earlier drafts of this manuscript.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2021.100121>.

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