



Cataloguing with the great satan : American influence on librarianship and library studies in Iran / Shiri Rotem-Nir

English summary

The following research deals with the American influence over librarianship and library studies in Iran, from the 1950s to the present. Examining the librarianship niche can strengthen our understanding of the social-academic implications of the Islamic Revolution and the Iranian perception towards the United States and its cultural influence.

Iran has a long history of librarianship. From the days of the Sassanides in the 4th century A.D. through the early Islamic period and up to the present day, libraries are regarded as an important place in Iran's intellectual scene.

During the second part of the 20th century, after World War II, libraries and library studies encountered a phase of modernization. The slow yet deep revolution in this field was made possible through American-Iranian cooperation, lasting until the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

American assistance to Iran after WWII took various forms. One form was Point Four, an American assistance program aimed at aiding developing countries in various fields, among them agriculture, sanitation and education. The American advisors who came to Iran in the realm of Point Four played an important part in the country's advancement and development. Librarianship was one such field that received a lot of attention.

American advisors who came to Iran in the 1950s, among them Susan Akers and Mary Gaver from the University of North Carolina, visited academic and public libraries and wrote reports. They listed the problems they encountered and provided possible solutions. Apart from providing consultancy services to libraries, these advisors taught short librarian courses, helping to train librarians and at the least providing technical manpower for library tasks.

Library education was not entirely new in Iran. Even before the American advisors' courses, a short course was delivered in 1938 at Tehran Teachers' College. The course lasted four months and was attended by school teachers and librarians. However, over the span of the next 14 years, until 1952, there were no courses

in librarianship. In 1952, Unesco (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) and the US Information Service (USIS) offered a six-month librarian course at Tehran University.

One recommendation that appeared repeatedly in the foreign advisors' reports regarding libraries, and especially the academic ones, was the lack of skilled, trained manpower. The short courses provided only superficial education, and the need for 'serious' programming was time and again called for. In 1966, the library study arena in Iran advanced a few steps with the opening of a Master's Degree program in Library Studies. The first program opened at Tehran University and was then introduced at other universities in the late 1960s, including Shiraz University, Mashhad University and later others.

The Masters, and later the bachelor's program, which started in 1968, followed the American model of library studies. As this was a relatively new field of study in Iran, it suffered many problems in its first stages. As a result of the lack of Persian material, the syllabus was almost entirely comprised of English-language materials. The staff consisted of Americans who were sent to Iran by the Fulbright program, an organization that played a central role in the advancement of education in Iran. Through the organization's activities and support, skilled librarians were sent to Iran for a period of several months or years, with the purpose of training Western-styled librarians in developing third-world countries.

Over the years, the American presence in Iran contributed greatly to improving not only library education but also library service. The advisors emphasized the importance of providing library customers with good service, criticized the closed-shelf policy and encouraged in-library and inter-library loans. One of the more important projects was the creation of Irandoc and Tebroc, the vision of John Harvey a leading American librarian in Iran. These two institutions, the Tehran Book Processing Center and the Iranian Documentation Center, handled and processed books and other library-items for the libraries in Iran, saving them time, money and especially a lot of work requiring skilled librarians. These two centers additionally provided internship placements for students, thus contributing to the Library Study department at Tehran University.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution shook Iranian life. Universities were closed for a Three-year "cultural revolution" and the entire higher education field was reconsidered. Library study encountered many problems after the revolution. As American teachers left, there were not enough trained staff members in the various departments.

The Islamic regime, aware of the Western roots of the field, initiated a conference in 1981 in the city of Mashhad. The discussions in the conference revolved, among others, around the American library techniques and their adaptation to the new regime's ideology. One of the conference's resolutions was to create a special team charged with adapting the curricula to the new ideology.

Given the new regime's aspiration to insert Islamic elements into the curricula, when the new programs finally started, new courses in the field were introduced that dealt with Islamic history, ethics etc. However, the lack of Persian materials, the fact that many of the staff members were trained in Western countries and the over-all Western heritage of the field brought about a very similar program to the previous one, apart from the new non-related Islamic and Iranian subjects.

Looking at the library study field today, one can see that the American "spirit" still exists. The list of courses is very much like the one that existed before the revolution, except as mentioned, the general Islamic subjects. As the Iranian universities try to keep up with the scientific pace of the Western world, technological courses are also offered to the students.

Descriptive cataloging is one field that demonstrates the presence of the American heritage, or rather Iran's wish to be a part of the international community of librarianship. Iranian libraries, from the days the American advisors started their work in the country, have used Library of Congress methods, as well as DDC (Dewey Decimal Classification). Descriptive cataloging is, in many ways, an outcome of the cultural and educational background of the cataloguer. Israeli libraries, for example, which follow the Library of Congress' cataloguing rules, provide books about Jerusalem with the Subject heading "Jerusalem (Israel)", thereby acknowledging Jerusalem as Israel's capital. The Library of Congress treats Jerusalem as an independent entity and simply calls it "Jerusalem". One would have expected, therefore, the subject headings in the Iranian descriptive catalogue to represent the political, cultural and social elements of the Iranian society. This is not, however, the case.

In this research, two politically loaded terms, "Holocaust, Jewish, 1939-1945" and "Terrorism" [in relation to Hezbollah] were inspected in the online catalogue of three major libraries in Iran: The National Library, the University of Tehran's Library and Mashad University's library. Although almost all academic libraries in Iran have an online catalogue, it was believed that these would best represent the overall picture. The National Library, which is headed, at least in principle, by the president, is supposed to represent the



“official” guidelines of the government. Tehran University, which has the largest book collection, represents the “mainstream” academic lines. Lastly, Mashad University’s catalogue was chosen as it was the third university established in Iran (1949) and has a long academic history, one in which the Americans took an active role.

The Iranian regime, especially since the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, has placed much emphasis on denying the Holocaust and portraying it as a Jewish conspiracy to take over Palestine at the expense of the Palestinians. The Holocaust, the regime stated once and again, did not occur, and the murder of Jews, if it did occur, was no different than the murder of other people in Europe as a result of the war situation. In this atmosphere of Holocaust denial, one would expect the online catalogue to represent the regime’s approach, and refrain from acknowledging this episode in history by naming it “Holocaust, Jewish, 1939-1945”.

Viewing the online catalogue, however, tells a different story. The term “Holocaust, Jewish, 1939-1945” appears time and again in almost all books dealing with the Holocaust, including Holocaust denial books. The subject headings chosen for books about the Holocaust are the same ones one would encounter if the books were to be catalogued by the Library of Congress.

Similar inconsistencies between stated policy and the online catalogue also appeared in some books dealing with Hezbollah. While Iran supports Hezbollah and treats it as a legitimate organization, some books in the online catalogue pertaining to Hezbollah contain the subject heading “Terrorism”. Treating Hezbollah as a terrorist organization or naming some of its acts as terror is something one would expect to see in an American or Israeli library, certainly not in an Iranian one.

In conclusion, even at the 21st century, 33 years after the Islamic Revolution, the American spirit of the Library Studied and Librarianship scene is alive. While the American staff members are long gone, their heritage remains. Iran seems to be an integral part of the modern library world. Many articles by Iranian scholars about librarianship are published in leading English periodicals, the curriculum is very much like others in the Western world and it seems as if the whole sphere of library study in Iran is still Western-affected.

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