

Well, a portion of this perspective derives from the relationship that Ayatollah Khamenei maintained with books, literature, and their adherents. There is no doubt that Afghanistan and other countries within the Persian linguistic geography are, politically, independent territories; however, just as that Afghan poet stated, Ayatollah Khamenei's literary standing had placed him, within the linguistic domain, at the apex of the realm of these countries — a matter that reverted to his professional bibliophilia, his excellent knowledge, and his concerned disposition.

#### In the sessions conducted with his presence, was there any particular thematic constraint imposed upon the poets?

Never! In none of the poetic sessions held with the presence of the martyred Leader was the recitation of any specific content imposed upon the poets. Even his own disposition was not such that he would favor particular themes — for instance, religious poetry. It had occurred numerous times that some poets would emphasize in the session that they had both religious and romantic verse prepared for recitation, yet Ayatollah Khamenei would select the romantic or the socially-oriented poem.

His encounter with critical poetry was likewise accompanied by receptivity and an open perspective. I myself, on several occasions, recited critical poems concerning the situation of immigrant poets, and he listened to my verses with patience. If his reception had not been favorable, we would not have recited critical poetry! The majority of the satirical poems recited in the sessions were also critical in nature. Mr. Naser Feiz, on account of the familiarity he had acquired with the martyred Leader, several years ago recited a critical satirical poem in his presence — a poem that, had a young and unfamiliar poet been in his place, ignorant of Ayatollah Khamenei's magnanimity, would never have been recited. I recall well that our martyred Leader, after Mr. Feiz recited this poem, smiled and, with cheerful countenance, announced his opinion.

I have recounted this so that the younger generation might know that if the poets present at these annual poetic gatherings selected particular themes, it was their own personal choice. If they perceived self-censorship on the part of poets in altering certain couplets, they would admonish that there is no need for such an action. The sole occasion upon which Ayatollah Khamenei requested that the poets no longer recite a particular theme was when one of the young poets recited a poem filled with praise and adulation of him. When the poem concluded, he addressed those present and beseeched them not to recite this type of poem in these sessions henceforth. This very recommendation was also offered most amicably, with the rationale and argument that if I commend such poems, others will suppose it is on account of their laudatory theme, and if I criticize them, the composer will take offense. His humility was such that he would caution poets against reciting such poems.

The sessions were extremely heartening, and over these years I have seen many poets who yearned to recite verse in the presence of the martyred Leader and to benefit from those assemblies. Regrettably, his martyrdom has left the grief of attending



Female and male Iranian writers and poets gift their published works to Leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei on May 20, 2019.  
● khamenei.ir

poetic sessions upon the hearts of many poets — a presence in which, contrary to certain rumors and in contrast to some literary congresses and festivals, there was no monetary reward, yet in spiritual and professional terms, it possessed abundant yields. Many new and talented figures were introduced to the country's literary community through these very sessions, and this under circumstances where some of those poets resided in small towns and remote regions — poets whose talents would not, under normal conditions, have attracted anyone's attention. This matter occurred also with respect to veteran figures, but in a different manner: when certain professors recited poetry in his presence, cultural officials would become cognizant of the necessity of honoring them through the organization of commemorative ceremonies.

#### What preoccupations did he harbor concerning Persian as the official language of the country and as a point of commonality among the countries of the cultural Greater Iran geography?

He maintained particular attention and a special regard for the subject of the Persian language and matters pertaining to it. But why is this regard so important and noteworthy? As was mentioned, regarding Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, we were confronted with a Leader and

religious scholar of the highest level of seminary education; the majority of Muslim scholars, on account of their religious training and the exigencies of their studies, exhibit greater inclination toward the Arabic language. Concerning the martyred Leader, however, the situation was different; despite his mastery of Arabic and his numerous authored works composed in Arabic, he harbored a perpetual concern for Persian literature and its standing.

This concerned and multifaceted perspective have also been among my perpetual astonishments, and I suspect that its root must be sought in his profound knowledge and extensive studies in the domain of Persian poetry and literature. He believed that a serious endeavor must be exerted for the elevation of Persian's global standing, and he emphasized that Persian should become the language of science.

#### The implementation of the martyred Leader's directives, some of which were mentioned, what yields would it bring forth?

The efforts of the country's cultural and educational officials to apply Ayatollah Khamenei's statements in the sphere of the Persian language and literature will have many yields, one of the most significant of which is the realization of cultural diplomacy as a groundwork for the achievement of other types of diploma-

The great Iranian poet Mohammad-Hossein Shahriar, who composed works in both Azerbaijani and Persian, recites a poem for then-president Seyyed Ali Khamenei (R) in Tabriz, Iran, in the summer of 1986.  
● SNN



”

In none of the poetic sessions held with the presence of the martyred Leader was the recitation of any specific content imposed upon the poets. Even his own disposition was not such that he would favor particular themes — for instance, religious poetry. It had occurred numerous times that some poets would emphasize in the session that they had both religious and romantic verse prepared for recitation, yet Ayatollah Khamenei would select the romantic or the socially-oriented poem.

cy, including public and political diplomacy. The presentation of various strategies for the official language and, on the other hand, the admonitions addressed to the responsible authorities, if emanating from a nationalist figure, would not be particularly extraordinary; but emanating from a religious scholar, perhaps it is not without precedent.

Permit me to recount an anecdote narrated by Mohammad-Hossein Jafarian, a journalist, war documentarian, and poet — an anecdote that Mr. Jafarian used to relate to me and other friends concerning the rationale behind Ayatollah Khamenei's statements for the expansion of the Persian language. In that meeting, the martyred Leader had emphasized that one of the necessities for the development of Persian reverts to its capacity for influencing the transmission of Islamic religious knowledge, and he considered its exemplification in the fact that whenever we have witnessed the expansion of our religious knowledge within the Persian cultural domain, this occurrence has taken place through the medium of the Persian language and with the aid of literary texts.

The majority of foreign enthusiasts have become acquainted with our religious knowledge through the poems of Rumi, Sa'di, and other great figures of Persian poetry. Had the literary masterpieces of the Persian language not functioned as a powerful bridge between Islam and other countries, the Islamic religion would not have spread to this extent in China and parts of Central Asia. The number of Muslims in China is perhaps slightly less than the Muslim population of Iran, which constitutes a considerable number. The number of Muslims in India and Pakistan is also very large. The Muslims of the aforementioned regions have predominantly not converted to Islam through religious books, but rather the literary texts produced in Persian have rendered them desirous.

Ayatollah Khamenei emphasized that if we seek religious propagation and the promulgation of revolutionary values, one of the optimal strategies is the strengthening of the Persian language. This perspective of the martyred Leader emanated from the mastery he possessed over the Persian language and literature. Interestingly, both Leaders of the Revolution regarded poetry with special attention; both Imam Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei were poets and men of philosophy. That both Leaders of the Islamic Revolution of Iran were litterateurs is a great fortune and felicity that has been granted to this country and its literature.

#### Over the past decades, Ayatollah Khamenei has repeatedly visited the Tehran International Book Fair and engaged in discourse with publishers concerning publishing matters and new book releases. Did his preoccupation with direct meetings with publishers and with learning of their concerns emanate from his mastery of world literature and his bibliophilia?

Undoubtedly, his pursuit and concern with matters pertaining to the publishing domain emanated from a particular affinity he maintained with books and reading. Ayatollah Khamenei did not have mastery only over poetry; he was a professional bibliophile.

You have likely heard that in his reading, he perused both au-

thored works and translations. In his youth, during the 1960s, he had read the majority of the world's seminal works of fiction, countless exemplifications of which can be observed in the content of his various statements concerning subjects related to books and in his meetings with the people of publishing.

Among the most manifest fruits of Ayatollah Khamenei's professional bibliophilia is the preoccupation he maintained for direct interaction with publishers and those involved in publishing. In every period of the Tehran International Book Fair that conditions permitted, he would visit it. A point that I mention on the basis of personal experience and follow-up is the martyred Leader's abstention from discrimination among publishers during these visits. In each visit, he would approach various publishers; some might suppose that his selection was exclusively of publishers of religious books, but if you review the content of the reports of these visits briefly, you will observe that in his numerous visits to different periods of the Tehran International Book Fair, he made no distinction among publishers and repeatedly visited the booths of publishers that carried books with intellectual themes, and discoursed about their problems and works. When you read these reports, you encounter Ayatollah Khamenei's opinions concerning various books — a matter that shows his bibliophilia and his awareness of the intellectual and literary currents of contemporary Iran and the world.

On the basis of this very characteristic, after each visit he would deliver addresses to cultural and national officials for the resolution of publishing domain issues. Ayatollah Khamenei was concerned with pursuing publishing and literary matters and frequently offered recommendations to officials for the amelioration of their condition, including the necessity of supporting a literary current or cultural institution.

#### What feedback did such an encounter of the martyred Leader with fictional literature and publishing matters have among the people of books?

To be truthful, for me personally, particularly in my younger years, this degree of knowledge and bibliophilia on his part was astonishing. Probably other poet and writer friends also harbored such a perception. Under normal circumstances, perhaps few would expect that a cleric and religious scholar, occupying such a station, would know poetry so well and also Iranian and foreign fictional literature!

This matter was far more astonishing in relation to certain books. Ayatollah Khamenei had read all the works of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky! Books such as Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* and even authors from various intellectual and political spectra of different decades in Iran he recognized and had read their works. He was well acquainted with poetic schools and various literary tendencies. This type of encounter and comprehensiveness in his studies — concerning ancient and contemporary poetry, as well as Iranian and foreign fictional literature — is not a matter that can be easily dismissed, and it exerted a positive influence upon the condition and perspective of the people of books.

The full interview first appeared in the Persian-language newspaper Iran.