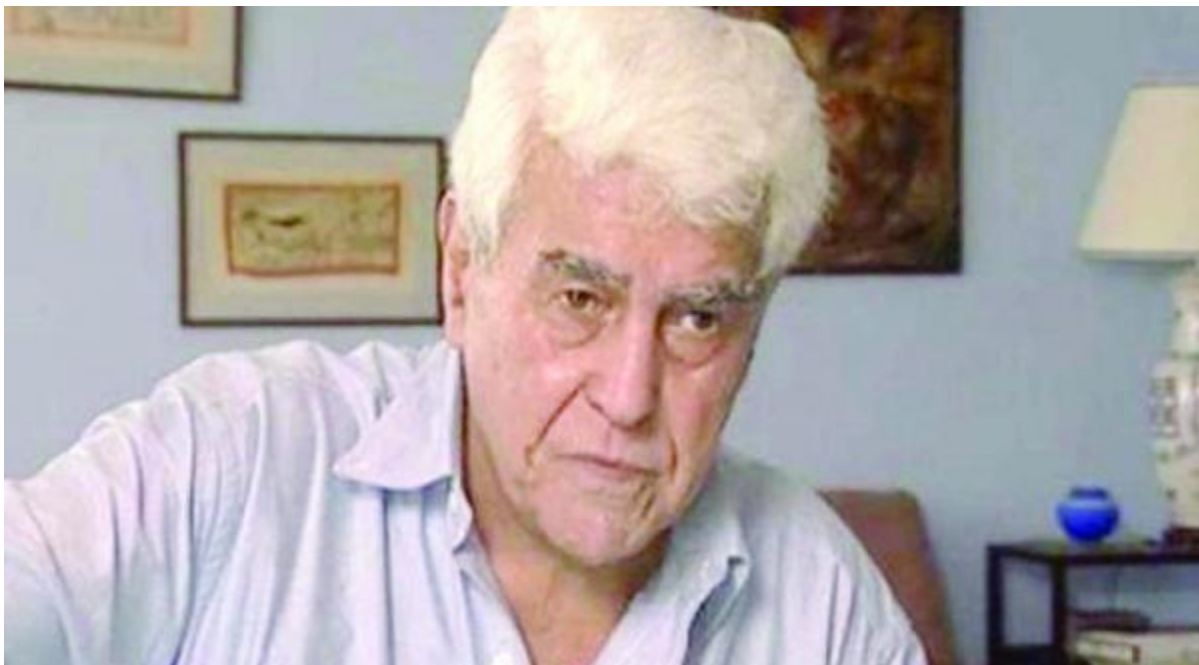


Veteran Reporter
Safa Haeri
Passes Away in Exile



[Amir Taheri](#)
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London-Muhammad Safa Haeri, professionally known only as Safa Haeri, has just passed away in exile in Paris, aged 79. He was one of the best-known members of a second generation of Iranians who developed journalism into a proper profession from the 1940s onwards.

The first generation, including people like Joe Mazandi, Ali Mehravari, Parviz Raein, Najfaqli Pessyan, Ali Jalali, Farrokh Kayvani and Esmail Pourvali did much to elevate the status of journalist, especially the reporter, in a traditional society that regarded journalism as a peripheral, if not slightly dishonorable, profession.

By the time the second generation, which Safa belonged to, came forward, journalism was already established as a respectable profession with reporters as its stars. Men like Ali Bastani, Ali-Akbar Kheirkhah, Muhammad Boluri, Parviz Naqibi and Siavash Azari and women like Pari Abasalti, Sima Dabir-Ashtiani and Mansureh Pirnia helped to heighten the prestige and authority of reporters as purveyors of unalloyed news.

“Safa” as he was known to his friends was born in a family of religious scholars hailing from Mazandaran with branches in Yazd, Mash’had and Najaf. Had he been born half a century earlier, Safa would most probably have been destined for a clerical career within the Shiite tradition. Instead, he was born in the final years of Reza Shah whose modernization project included a downgrading of the clerical profession and religious institutions.

Having taken French as his foreign language at Firuz-Bahram Secondary School, in the mid-1950s, Safa was sent to Paris for further studies. Soon, however, his insatiable thirst for adventure trumped whatever academic ambitions he might have had and he joined the French Foreign Legion then engaged in the Algerian War of independence. Unable to identify with the French cause while failing to develop any sympathy for the Algerians, Safa left the legion and, after what he called “a brief vagabondage” in Africa and Europe, returned home. In later years he wrote of the “unbelievable atrocities” he had witnessed on both sides of the Algerian war.

Lacking academic qualifications in a society where university degrees were seen as passports to upward social mobility, Safa could not hope for any promising position within the secure world of civil service. Having no sense of business either, he had to seek new fields where neither degrees nor family connections mattered. Journalism was one such field, at the time.

Safa landed a job as translator with the state-owned Pars News Agency while also working as stringer for Agence France Presse which had just sent a permanent correspondent, one Monsieur Jean-Claude Berard to Tehran. Making use of his brief experience in Africa, he also wrote a number of features on the Algerian war, then in its final phases, for the weekly magazines Kavian and Bamshad.

As Pars News Agency’s star reporter, Safa covered a number of official trips by the late Shah and Queen Farah and senior officials including the prime minister and foreign minister.

In 1962-63 he self-financed a trip to Vietnam to cover the war, making a documentary for the state-owned television network. He was to make a second trip to Vietnam in 1975 when the war was drawing to a close and the fall of Saigon was imminent.

In 1970 he joined the daily French-language Journal de Teheran, published by the Ettelaat Group, as Diplomatic Correspondent while also contributing to the then newly-established

Persian-language daily Ayandehgan. He covered the Indo-Pakistan war of 1970 and the Egyptian-Israeli war of 1973.

In 1973 he was recruited as a fulltime reporter by the National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT) and posted to Beirut as Middle East Correspondent. There, he created a vast network of contacts that included Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Imam Mousa Sadr, an Iranian mullah sent by the Shah to lead the Lebanese Shiites. His dispatches from the region, including many from Damascus and Cairo helped a larger audience of Iranians get acquainted with the Arab-Israeli conflict without the usual constraints of emotional attachments and prejudices. His impartiality, however, antagonized anti-Israel circles who falsely accused him of pro-Jewish sentiments and “suspicious connections” with the Israeli Embassy in Tehran.

Perhaps partly in response to those pressures, the NIRT directors decided to send Safa to the other end of the world as Asia Correspondent based in Hong Kong with a brief to watch China’s then dicey attempts at rejoining the world of normality. Safa’s reporting on China provided Iranian audiences with some of the first accounts of the way the Asian “giant” was trying to absorb its Communist experience and seek a new place in the community of nations.

When the mullahs seized power in Tehran in 1979, the new Islamic revolutionary regime asked Safa to remain in his post in Hong Kong putting him in an uneasy and ambiguous situation. However, the removal of Sadegh Qutbzadeh as head of the NIRT under the Islamic regime triggered massive purges, the ripples of which reached the Asia Correspondent who was ordered to immediately return to Tehran. (Ghotbzadeh was later executed on Ayatollah Khomeini’s orders.)

Informed by colleagues and friends that returning to Iran would mean a one-way ticket, Safa decided to ignore promises of new assignments and, accompanied by his wife Nushin, flew to Paris with a wait-and-see agenda which they believed would take no more than a few months. However, the few months morphed into years and then decades and the couple reorganized their mental landscape gearing it to the idea of permanent exile.

In exile, Safa did some stringing for various opposition groups, including a stint as international affairs analyst for a radio program broadcast from Baghdad with one of his old Ettelaat colleagues Touraj Farazmand as Editor-in-Chief. He also wrote analytical pieces for another anti-mullah radio program beamed from Cairo under the supervision of an NIRT veteran Iraj Gorgin.

In the 1980s, Safa also contributed to Ruzegar-Now (New Epoch), a magazine published by his old friend and boss Esmail Pourvali in Paris. Safa also did some reporting for the British daily The Independent on the 8-year war between Iran and Iraq.

One of the first Iranian journalists to learn to use the internet, Safa launched Iran Press Service (IPS) in Paris, the first privately-owned Iranian web newspaper which was to live for almost three decades. IPS offered little in the way of original copy but was a much appreciated source for access to the work of others as expertly selected by Safa. At the same time Safa’s additional

commentaries and footnotes to the texts that he selected helped IPS readers acquire a better understanding of the context.

In his later years, however, Safa was struck by declining health that ended up making him housebound, a painful condition for a globe-trotter prompted by boundless curiosity to be present wherever something interesting happened. For Safa, that meant being exiled a second time, this time in his 17th arrondissement apartment in the broader context of a Parisian exile.

Those who knew Safa knew how he suffered from that isolation, with great dignity worthy of the steadfast stoic he had always been.



[Amir Taheri](#)

Amir Taheri was the executive editor-in-chief of the daily *Kayhan* in Iran from 1972 to 1979. He has worked at or written for innumerable publications, published eleven books, and has been a columnist for *Asharq Al-Awsat* since 1987. Mr. Taheri has won several prizes for his journalism, and in 2012 was named International Journalist of the Year by the British Society of Editors and the Foreign Press Association in the annual British Media Awards.