



SERĀJ AL-AḲBĀR-E AFGĀNIYA

SERĀJ al-AḲBĀR-e AFGĀNIYA, “Torch of the news of Afghanistan,” bi-monthly Persian language newspaper published in Kabul during the second decade of the reign of [Amir Ḥabib-Allāh](#) (r. 1901-19). Preceded by two short-lived publications, *Šams al-nahār* (1873) and *Serāj al-aḳbār-e Afġānestān* (1906) (Āhang, 1970, pp. 1-43), this important periodical launched the development of the Afghan press.

It was a large format newspaper (33 x 24cm) with 12 to 14 pages, printed by lithography for the first year and then by typography with illustrations. *Serāj al-aḳbār* had a circulation of approximately 1600 copies, some of which were distributed free of charge whilst others went to the highest-paid Afghan civil servants in exchange for a mandatory deduction from their wages. Some copies were also traded for foreign Muslim newspapers (Schinasi, 1979, pp. 65-66, pp. 68-70).

Serāj al-aḳbār was the work of a single man, Maḥmud Ṭarzi. Convinced of the benefits that a newspaper could bring to a nation (*Serāj al-aḳbār*, 1912, II/2, pp. 6-7; 1914, III/11, p. 13), Ṭarzi was entirely responsible for the whole operation and for all the unsigned articles. The signed articles were written by his small team, comprised of translators and fledgling Afghan and Turkish Ottoman journalists (Schinasi, 1979, pp. 42-43, pp. 66-68).

The first issue was dated 15 Šawwāl 1329/16 Mizān 1290 Š./9 October 1911, and the newspaper continued to be published for some time with the support of Amir Ḥabib-Allāh, who favored Ṭarzi’s efforts to reconcile the monarchy and



nationalism under the banner of Islam and modern ideology. In exchange for this support, the newspaper published “local news (*ḥawādeṭ-e dāḳeliya*),” focused on the sovereign himself and his efforts at modernization (*Serāj al-aḳbār*, 1913, II/20, p. 3; III/4, p. 3; III/9, p. 2), with the exception of political affairs. Later, when the two men adopted different positions during the First World War, a certain degree of tension developed in their relationship, although the newspaper’s existence was not threatened. By refusing to act as an official newspaper, by discussing the role that Afghanistan could play in the spread of Pan-Islamism, and by deliberately limiting “foreign news” (*ḥawādeṭ-e kārejiya*) to raw facts extracted from the foreign press, *Serāj al-aḳbār*, i.e. Ṭarzi and his sympathizers, the Young Afghans, expressed their hostile view of Afghanistan’s neutrality (ibid., 1914, IV/1 p. 6, and IV/4, p. 2; Sims-Williams, pp. 119-20; Nawid, 1993, pp. 96-99). These increasing clashes, exacerbated by the newspaper’s overtly pro-Turkish and anti-British stance, its nationalist aspirations and calls for independence (*Serāj al-aḳbār*, 1918, VII/13, pp. 1-7, and VII/23, pp. 15-16; Sims-Williams, pp. 120-21), eventually caused it to be shut down. The final issue was dated 15 Rabi‘ I 1337/27 Qaws 1297 Š./19 December 1918.

In a notoriously underdeveloped country where the majority of the population was illiterate, the publication of *Serāj al-aḳbār* was a seemingly impossible challenge. In fact, one of Ṭarzi’s aims was to use the newspaper to analyze the reasons why Afghanistan lagged so far behind, to put forward solutions and turn his paper into an educational tool, a window on the world, and a vehicle for new ideas.

Calls to fight the ignorance and illiteracy that plagued Afghanistan, to allocate the necessary resources to education and the acquisition of knowledge (*Serāj al-aḳbār*, 1913, II/9, p. 2; 1915, IV/2, p. 2), open public education up to modern scientific subjects, give women the place denied them by the clergy (Nawid, 1995), and the battle against moral degradation and corruption (*Serāj al-aḳbār*, 1913, III/4, pp. 2-3) were all aimed at Afghanistan’s ruling classes, with a view to ending the country’s inertia, putting it on the road to independence, and reforming society.

Another of *Serāj al-aḳbār*’s goals was to bridge the gap between Afghanistan and the outside world and inform Afghans about the latest developments in science, technology, intellectual discussions, and the progress of humanity by means of articles on subjects as varied as meteorology and cosmography, medicine, philosophy, history, geography, major scientific discoveries etc.



(Schinasi, 1979, pp. 152-60).

Serāj al-aḳbār criticized both the colonial powers and Muslim theologians for their share of responsibility in the overall inertia of the Muslim world. To those whom Ṭarzi accused of depreciating Islamic religion, of being conservative, obstructing modernity and lulling the lower classes into ignorance, the newspaper strived to demonstrate that progress and modernization were compatible with Islam's teachings (*Serāj al-aḳbār*, 1914, III/24, p. 3; 1917, VI/14, pp. 2-3, and passim up to VI/21, pp. 7-9).

Indeed, Islam was very much present in *Serāj al-aḳbār*, which claimed to be above all a Muslim newspaper (ibid., 1913, II/11, p. 14a) for which loving one's religion was synonymous with loving one's country (ibid., 1912, I/7, pp. 6-7). This was where the newspaper's ambitions went beyond Afghanistan's borders. Like *Ḥabl al-matin*, the Persian newspaper published in Calcutta, it became a medium for spreading Pan-Islamism in the region and attracted many readers in India and Central Asia. It called upon Muslim countries to rally and recover the golden era of previous centuries (ibid., 1912 I/13, p. 11; 1917, VI/15, p. 10), and declared that the links between Afghanistan, the Ottoman Empire and Persia were such that they could help bring unification and solidarity to the Muslim world. If Muslims stood united amongst themselves, alongside Asia's non-Muslims, they would be strong enough to resist European imperialism (ibid., 1915, IV/19, p. 9).

As a newspaper, *Serāj al-aḳbār* brought innovation in the field of writing and language. The specific genres of the written press—editorials, classifieds, letters to the editor, serials etc.—were new to Afghan readers, who also had to familiarize themselves with a whole new vocabulary, as Ṭarzi himself acknowledged (ibid., 1914, III/11, p. 13). It also introduced new forms of literature. A large share of the “Literature” (*adabiyāt*) column was given over to poetry, Ṭarzi's way of promoting a new form of poetry (*še'r-e ṭarz-e jadid*) bearing messages about politics, patriotism, progress and, more specifically, social progress (Ghani, pp. 435-39; Nawid, 1993; *Serāj al-aḳbār*, 1912, I/17, p. 14). The column was also open to all the new genres, “from East and West” (ibid., 1911, I/2, p. 7), with a selection of foreign literature that included short stories, novels, essays, originally in English and especially French, which were translated into Persian from their Turkish version (Schinasi, 1979, p. 79, 81 n.38).

“Simultaneously a newspaper, a literary magazine, a philosophical and



scientific journal, and a political tract” (Ghani, p. 438), *Serāj al-aḳbār* was also a reform program in its own right, advocating a modern Afghan state with full independence as its pre-requisite. The months that followed its closure proved that the newspaper had fulfilled its mission (see [AMĀNALLĀH](#)).

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