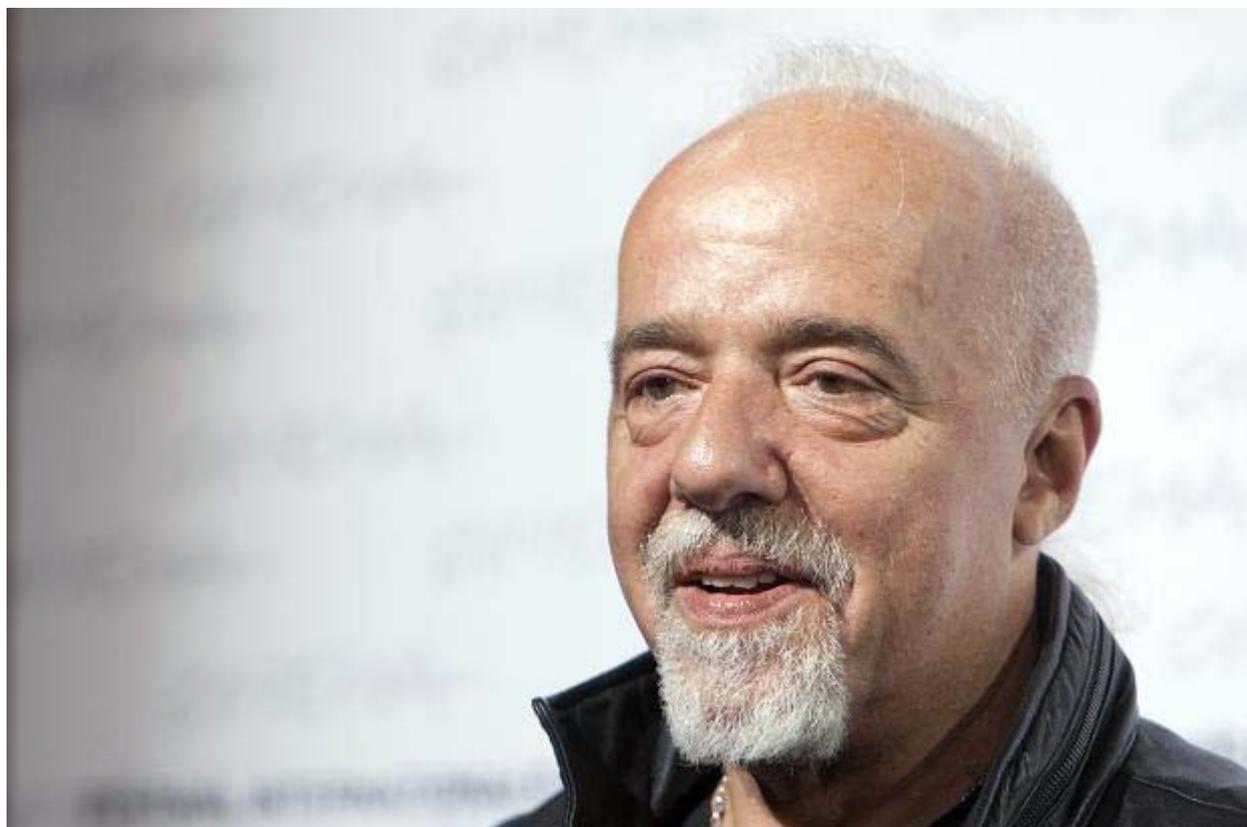


# Coelho hits back at Iran as regime denies it has banned novelist



The Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho is popular in Iran

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**Martin Fletcher**

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The Iranian regime yesterday issued a bizarre and belated denial of reports that it had banned the books of the acclaimed Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho.

The denial came after criticism from the Brazilian Government, one of the few countries that the regime has good relations with, and a decision by Coelho to post Farsi translations of 17 of his books on the internet. "Copy, share, print and distribute freely," he invited Iranian readers. Coelho is popular in the Islamic republic. His books have been published in the country since 1998 and have sold about six million copies. He was greeted by hundreds of fans when he visited Tehran in May 2000.

He is less popular with the regime, however, as he has befriended and defended Arash Hejazi, the doctor who was the managing director of his Iranian publishers, Caravan.

Dr Hejazi fled to Britain after he was filmed trying to save the life of Neda Agha Soltan, the student who became a global symbol of the regime's barbarity when she was shot dead during a demonstration against President Ahmadinejad's disputed re-election in

2009.

The regime closed Caravan down last year. Last week Dr Hejazi was told by a contact in the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance that “no book that has Paulo Coelho’s name on it will be authorised to be published in Iran any more”.

Dr Hejazi said: “It seems that Paulo Coelho is paying the price of speaking up about me.”

Coelho not only drew attention to Dr Hejazi’s plight after the film of Ms Soltan’s death went viral, but has written a foreword to his friend’s forthcoming book, *The Gaze of the Gazelle*, in which he calls her shooting an “unspeakable crime”.

“It makes no sense to forbid books that were being published for the past 12 years,” Coelho wrote on his blog. “The contents did not change — they are still the same.”

The Brazilian Government, which defended Iran’s nuclear programme, took up the issue. President Rousseff and Antonio Patriota, the Foreign Minister, sought an explanation. Ana de Hollanda, the Culture Minister, called the ban “absurd” and said: “I regret any kind of censorship.”

Yesterday, a week after the ban was first reported, the Iranian Embassy in Brazil said that the controversy had been “created and planned by [Dr Hejazi] with collaboration and direction from US and Israeli agents in accordance with a global plan aimed at tarnishing Iran’s image”.

It also accused Dr Hejazi of murdering Ms Soltan. Dr Hejazi said: “When accused of banning Paulo Coelho’s books in Iran they not only deny the fact, but they also lie to accuse a witness to an unspeakable crime.”

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