

Digital Publishing and Print-on-Demand in Iran: Economic & Cultural Perspectives Amid Sanctions and Absent International Copyright Protections

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Article information:

Manuscript received: 4 Oct 2025; **Accepted:** 10 Nov 2025; **Published:** 22 Dec 2025

Introduction

Digital technologies are transforming the global publishing industry, yet Iran's book market has been slow to reap the benefits. In many developed markets, e-books and audiobooks now contribute a significant share – for example, about **20%** of Americans purchased an e-book in the past year (versus ~30% who bought a print book)[1]. In China, digital reading has become even more prevalent, with digital formats surpassing print in popularity[1]. By contrast, in Iran digital books still make up only a small fraction of the market. An estimated **12–15%** of reading by Iranian consumers is done in digital formats, accounting for roughly **7%** of total book sales revenue[2]. This low uptake is not due to lack of interest – indeed, around **12 million** Iranians read e-books each year – but rather to structural challenges[3][4]. Surveys show only about **2.5 million** of those digital readers (~20%) obtain their e-books legally through platforms, while the vast majority rely on unofficial channels like social media and Telegram groups[4]. In other words, unauthorized distribution (“piracy”) dominates Iran's digital reading scene, undermining the development of a healthy e-book economy.

Several factors have contributed to this situation. One major issue is the **absence of robust copyright enforcement**. Iran is *not* a signatory to the Berne Convention for international copyright protection, nor to the WIPO Copyright Treaty, and it is not a member of the WTO[5]. As a result, foreign works are not automatically protected in Iran, and domestic copyright enforcement is weak[6]. Industry reports note that piracy is rampant: **pirated software, books, and music are widespread in Iran**, with minimal legal repercussions[6]. Culturally, years of easy access to free bootleg PDFs and scanned books have conditioned readers to expect content at no cost, making it difficult for legal e-book services to compete. Additionally, **international sanctions** on Iran have cut off access to many technologies and services used in digital publishing. Global e-book platforms (Amazon Kindle, Google Books, etc.) do not operate in Iran, and advanced Digital Rights Management (DRM) systems are largely unavailable. U.S. sanctions prohibit providing many software licenses or cloud services to Iran, meaning Iranian publishers cannot use common DRM providers like Google Widevine or Apple FairPlay to protect content[7]. As one Iranian technology provider lamented, “*given global sanctions, currently providing a full DRM system in Iran is not possible*”, since leading DRM infrastructure services will not work in the country[7]. These legal and technical barriers have left a gap that is only now beginning to be addressed

by local innovation.

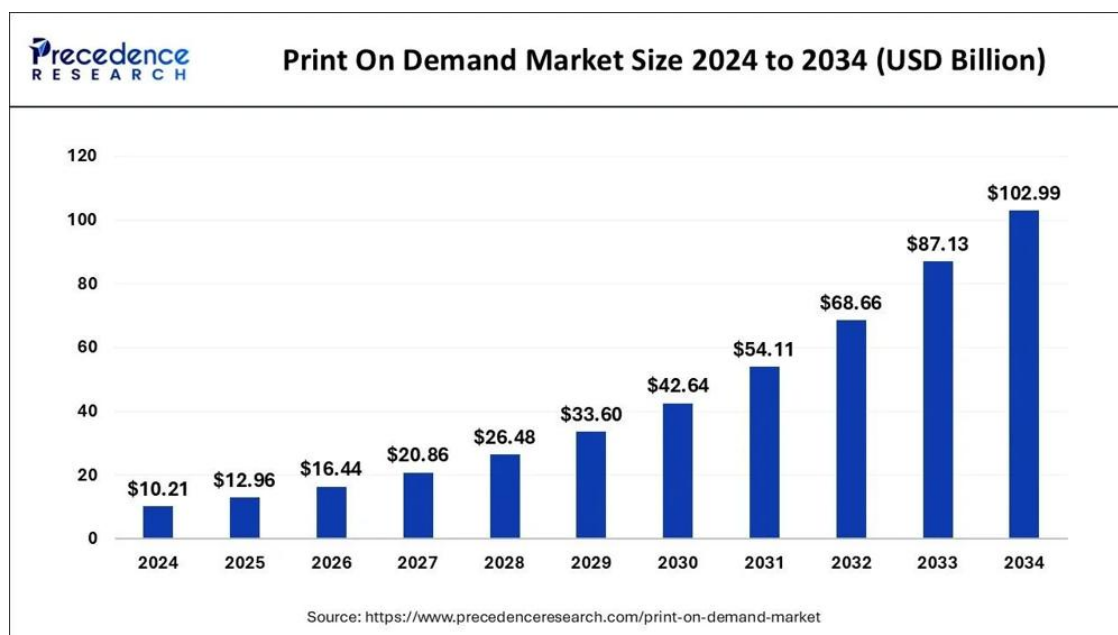
Despite the challenges, the **potential upside of digital publishing in Iran is enormous**. The country has a young, tech-savvy population with high smartphone penetration, and interest in e-reading is growing. Industry experts predict that with the right infrastructure and policies, Iran's digital book sales could reach at least **20%** of the national book market in the coming years[8]. This would still be lower than the ~35% digital share seen in some advanced markets[8], but represents a four-fold growth from current levels. Realizing this potential will require solutions that **align economic incentives** for publishers and authors, **respect cultural habits** of readers, and **overcome the sanctions and copyright limitations**. The case of the *MANA* digital publishing project – branded publicly as the “**Ketabino**” platform – offers a useful study of how these goals can be achieved. Ketabino was recently recognized as one of the top innovations in Iran's publishing industry[9], for its approach to combining secure e-book distribution with print-on-demand services. In this article, we analyze the economic and cultural dimensions of Iran's digital publishing landscape, discuss the role of sanctions and lack of international copyright in shaping that landscape, and examine the Ketabino platform's experience in comparison to international examples.

Economic Opportunities of Digital Publishing and POD

From an economic perspective, expanding digital publishing and print-on-demand (POD) services in Iran could create significant efficiency gains and new revenue streams in the book industry. Traditional print publishing in Iran (as elsewhere) is **capital-intensive** and often wasteful – publishers must invest in an upfront print run, typically bearing at least 30% of the cover price in printing and paper costs, and then store and distribute physical inventory. Many niche or academic titles with expected low sales are never printed at all because the economics do not justify a large initial run. This leads to a scarcity of specialized books, and unsold printed books can tie up capital or end up as unsold stock. A shift to **print-on-demand** can drastically reduce these costs. With POD, copies of a book are produced *only* when an order is placed, even if it is a single copy. This eliminates the risk of unsold inventory and the need for warehousing. The publisher's upfront cost approaches zero aside from editing and digital preparation, making it feasible to offer a much wider selection of titles (including low-demand and out-of-print works) profitably. The economic benefit is twofold: **readers gain access** to books that would otherwise be unavailable, and **publishers earn revenue** from works that previously generated nothing. In the case of Ketabino's platform, the team explicitly targets this inefficiency – their service allows a publisher to upload an e-book (EPUB/PDF) and immediately offer it for sale digitally, *and* simultaneously enable a printed copy to be ordered on-demand. The customer who prefers print can receive a freshly printed copy within ~72 hours, delivered to their address, while the publisher avoids any upfront print investment. This model unlocks income from “long tail” content and can extend the commercial life of books indefinitely.

On the consumer side, **digital distribution** yields price benefits that can stimulate demand. E-books in Iran are generally sold at a lower price than print – roughly one-third the price of the printed edition on average[2] – because there are no printing or physical logistics costs. This affordability can attract price-sensitive readers and expand the overall market. In Iran's economic climate, where paper prices and printing costs have soared with inflation, cheaper e-books and audio books have become attractive substitutes[10][2]. Each conversion of a reader from buying a pirated copy (or not buying at all) to buying a reasonably priced legal e-book means new revenue entering the publishing ecosystem. Moreover, by **securing revenue for authors and publishers**, digital sales (if scaled up) can make publishing more sustainable and incentivize content creation. For example, the Ketabino platform has adopted a *zero-commission* model for an initial period – returning **100% of e-book sales revenue to the author** – to encourage authors and publishers to join and upload their

catalogs. Although the platform will eventually take a service fee, the promise of higher royalty shares (compared to traditional publishing splits) can draw more content creators into the market, thereby increasing the supply of legal e-books available to consumers.



Global print-on-demand market size and growth projection (2024–2034). The print-on-demand sector is forecast to reach nearly \$103 billion by 2034 (~26% CAGR)[11], illustrating the significant economic potential of POD technology. Reduced risk and waste (printing only after a sale) is a key driver of this rapid growth, suggesting that embracing POD could unlock substantial value in Iran’s publishing industry as well.

The global trends also point to the **long-term economic importance** of digital and on-demand models. As shown above, the worldwide print-on-demand market is expanding rapidly – valued around \$10 billion in 2024 and projected to grow to over \$100 billion in the next decade[11]. Investors and publishers around the world are pouring resources into POD infrastructure because it offers scalability without proportional cost increases. Iran’s publishing sector stands to gain from tapping into this trend. Similarly, while the global **e-book market** growth has stabilized in recent years, it still represents a multi-billion dollar segment with steady annual growth. In advanced markets, e-books + audiobooks have become a significant portion of publishers’ revenue mix (one-third or more)[8]. By catching up to even a 20% digital share (as projected for Iran)[12], Iranian publishers could substantially increase their total sales. This growth would not only benefit private publishers and bookstores, but also have positive upstream effects – more demand for editors, translators, IT developers (for platforms and apps), and print-on-demand equipment and logistics. It could also reduce Iran’s **reliance on imported paper** and printing materials (a notable financial burden currently) by shifting consumption to digital, thereby keeping more currency in the local economy.

Finally, the digital model opens opportunities for **recurring revenue and services** beyond one-time book sales. A platform like MANA/Ketabino envisions offering SaaS (Software-as-a-Service) tools to publishers on a subscription basis – e.g. a monthly fee for access to a full suite of digital distribution, analytics, and DRM services. This creates a more predictable revenue stream compared to the hit-driven economics of print sales. Value-added services such as data analytics (reporting reading trends), targeted marketing for books, or premium features for readers (cloud libraries, cross-device sync, etc.) could further diversify revenue. In sum, the economic case for digital publishing + POD in Iran is compelling: it

reduces costs and barriers to entry, increases market reach and revenue potential, and aligns the industry with global growth trends.

Cultural and Social Implications

Beyond immediate economics, the shift toward digital publishing carries important cultural and social implications in the Iranian context. One anticipated benefit is the **greater accessibility of knowledge and literature**. By leveraging e-books and POD, even specialized or academic works with limited audiences can be made available countrywide. This could dramatically shrink the phenomenon of “کتاب کمیاب” (scarce/out-of-print books). For instance, university libraries and students often struggle to obtain certain textbooks or research monographs that are out of print; with on-demand printing, a single copy can be produced whenever needed. The MANA project proposal estimated that by digitizing low-print-run academic titles and offering them via print-on-demand, it could reduce the share of “hard to find” books from ~18% of academic titles to under 5% within the first year of operation (a projection based on the current size of the academic publishing segment). **Improving the availability of scholarly and educational resources** in this way would support Iran’s large student population (some 4.5 million tertiary students) and researchers, potentially boosting the country’s scientific output and educational outcomes. In a broader sense, it promotes **equity in access to information** – readers in smaller cities or remote areas with few bookstores could obtain the same range of books through online delivery. This helps decentralize cultural access that has traditionally been Tehran-centric.

Another cultural impact relates to **reading habits and the promotion of legal content consumption**. As noted, a huge portion of Iran’s e-reading currently happens via unofficial or pirated channels[4]. This not only deprives authors of earnings but can also affect the quality of content readers receive (files may be outdated versions, with errors from scanning/OCR, etc.). By providing a convenient and affordable legal alternative, platforms like Ketabino aim to **shift reader behavior** gradually toward legitimate sources. Part of this involves building a community and narrative around supporting authors – Ketabino’s branding emphasizes the direct connection between reader and writer, with slogans about buying directly to reward the creator. Early user feedback on the platform has been positive in this regard, with readers reporting satisfaction that *“I feel like I’m directly supporting the author”* and authors praising the model that *“100% of the sale proceeds went to me; the zero-percent commission really multiplied my motivation”* (testimonial of an independent author on the platform’s beta site). Over time, such platforms could help **foster a culture of respecting intellectual property**, even in the absence of strong legal enforcement. This cultural change is admittedly a slow process – especially since generations of Iranian readers have grown accustomed to free content – but it parallels the shifts seen in other media (for example, the rise of legal music streaming in a market once dominated by bootleg MP3s).

There are also **social implications in terms of work and inclusion**. Embracing digital operations allows for more flexible and distributed work models in publishing. The MANA/Ketabino team itself is structured as a hybrid workforce: a small core team on-site and many specialists (IT developers, support staff, designers) working remotely from various cities. This approach taps into talent (especially female professionals and those in smaller towns) who might not be able to relocate to Tehran for full-time jobs. Remote work opportunities in the digital publishing value chain – from editing and proofreading e-books to customer support and marketing via social media – can create jobs for people who prefer or need to work from home. Studies have shown that remote workers often exhibit **higher productivity (up to 13% more)** and greater retention (10% higher) compared to office-bound workers [user’s data], and a **significant portion (42%) of remote employees prefer to increase their remote hours** rather than return to full-time in-office roles [user’s

data】. While these statistics are global and drawn from general business research, they underscore a trend that the Iranian publishing sector can leverage to its benefit. By combining an on-site incubator space (in a co-working hub with mentorship, as MANA intends to do) with remote team members, a startup can both **increase its chances of survival** (business incubation programs like EU|BIC report ~83% 3-year survival rates for startups in incubators) and **reduce overhead costs**. Culturally, this model also signals a modern, inclusive work culture that could attract young talent to the publishing industry, an industry often seen as very traditional.

Finally, digital platforms can help **preserve and promote Persian literature and linguistic heritage**. With multilingual support, Iranian digital publishing platforms could reach the Persian-speaking diaspora and neighboring countries. MANA's vision includes expansion to Persian speakers in other countries (and even offering an English/Arabic interface for international reach). This has cultural significance: it enables a wider dissemination of Iranian authors' works, potentially elevating Persian literature on the world stage despite Iran's political isolation. In summary, the move toward digital publishing in Iran is not just a business venture; it intersects with cultural policy (promoting reading, supporting authors), social development (job creation and inclusion), and the preservation of cultural assets in the digital age.

Challenges: Sanctions and Copyright Limitations

While the potential benefits are clear, any digital publishing initiative in Iran must contend with the **formidable challenges posed by international sanctions and the lack of integration into global copyright regimes**. These two factors create a less-than-hospitable environment for building a secure and reputable digital content platform.

1. Copyright Gaps and Piracy: Iran's exclusion from major international copyright treaties (like Berne) means there is no automatic legal protection for foreign works in Iran, and vice versa[5]. Practically, this has led to a culture where unlicensed reproduction of books (especially translations of foreign titles) is common. For instance, popular novels and textbooks are often translated and sold in Iran without permission, and similarly, PDF scans circulate freely online. Even for domestic publications, enforcement of copyright within Iran is weak – the market is flooded with illegitimate PDFs and even physical reprints. As the Iran International news noted in late 2025, *“copyright enforcement remains minimal in Iran, where counterfeit software, pirated books, and unlicensed music are widespread.”*[6]. This situation poses a **trust problem** for legal digital platforms: how to convince publishers (and readers) that content on the platform will not be immediately stolen and reposted elsewhere for free. Part of the solution lies in technology (DRM, watermarks, etc.), but part of it is also legal and educational. Currently, without strong legal deterrents, a determined pirate can operate with little fear of consequences. This is a policy issue beyond any one startup's control. However, platforms can work closely with government entities (e.g. Ministry of Culture's anti-piracy efforts) to identify and shut down large-scale infringing channels. They can also educate users on the ethical and quality advantages of using legal sources. In the long run, Iran's anticipated move to join the Berne Convention (discussed in policy circles since 2012[5]) could bolster the legal framework, but until then, digital publishers must navigate a “gray” market where their paid content competes against free copies. This challenge makes **robust DRM (Digital Rights Management)** almost a necessity to operate – which leads to the next hurdle.

2. Technical Barriers Under Sanctions: Modern e-book platforms typically rely on proprietary DRM systems to protect content (for example, Amazon's Kindle DRM or Adobe Content Server for EPUB). Due to U.S. and EU sanctions, Iranian businesses cannot license or use many of these systems. As an Iranian tech blog on streaming noted, *“given global*

*sanctions, currently the capability to offer a DRM system in Iran does not exist... DRM providers [like] Google Widevine, Apple FairPlay and Microsoft PlayReady [are] sanctioned”, forcing local developers to resort to workaround methods[7]. This extends to publishing: an Iranian e-book app cannot easily use Google’s Widevine DRM (commonly used for video and some ebook encryption) because Google will not authorize it for an Iranian entity. Even if the software were technically obtainable, the risk of violating sanctions or having the service cut off is a major concern. Similarly, hosting services, payment gateways, and other infrastructure for a digital content business face restrictions. For example, accepting international payments or selling to readers abroad is complicated by banking sanctions. These limitations require Iranian solutions that are often **less mature or more cumbersome** than global counterparts.*

To mitigate the DRM issue, the Ketabino platform adopted an **open-standard DRM** approach. Specifically, it utilizes **Readium LCP**, a DRM system developed by an open consortium which became an ISO standard in 2024[13]. Readium LCP (Licensed Content Protection) is designed for e-books (EPUB/PDF) and allows encryption and controlled device access without tying into the big tech ecosystems[13]. Because it is open and vendor-neutral, it can be implemented in Iran without needing permission from a foreign company. This is a clever way to sidestep sanctions while still providing industrial-grade content protection. Readium LCP uses strong encryption (AES-256) and supports features like limiting the number of devices or time period an e-book can be accessed[14][15]. It can even enforce **print restrictions** – for instance, preventing or limiting the ability to print pages from an e-book file[15]. Such controls are important for the print-on-demand aspect: the platform can allow a file to be printed **one time** at the partnered POD press, producing a single copy of a book, while blocking any further prints of that file[15]. This ensures that when a customer orders one printed copy, they cannot illicitly print additional copies beyond what was purchased. In essence, technology is substituting for what legal deterrence would normally do – making it *technically* hard to steal or duplicate content. Of course, no DRM is unbreakable, and a determined adversary might still find ways around it (for example, by scraping screenshots or using an unprotected audio read-aloud). But the idea is to raise the barrier enough that casual piracy is reduced and honest customers are funneled toward legitimate usage.

Another challenge under sanctions is the integration with **global supply chains and markets**. Print-on-demand by its nature can be local (you only need local digital presses), but certain components like specialized printing equipment, DRM-enabled readers, or even ISBN registration with international agencies could be impeded by trade restrictions. The Ketabino project, for example, must ensure that the POD machines or printing materials it uses can be imported despite sanctions (printing machinery might fall under general trade categories not explicitly banned, but financing the imports can be tricky). Likewise, distributing Iranian e-books internationally (e.g. selling Persian e-books to the diaspora on global platforms) is constrained because Amazon Kindle or Apple Books do not support payments into Iran. One way around this is to base part of the operation in a neighboring country or free zone to handle international transactions – a strategy some Iranian apps have used. However, setting up such an entity brings its own legal complexities.

In summary, the sanctions force Iranian digital publishers to innovate with **homegrown or open-source solutions** and sometimes operate in semi-isolation. The lack of international copyright ties forces them to rely on **technological self-defense (DRM)** and building a new culture of trust with users. These are non-trivial challenges that make the playing field uneven compared to a similar startup in, say, Europe. Nonetheless, as the Ketabino case shows, they are not insurmountable: by using open standards, engaging local authorities, and focusing on user experience, a digital platform can still carve out a viable space under these

constraints.

Case Study: The MANA/Ketabino Platform Experience

The **MANA online publishing center**, publicly known by its platform name “Ketabino”, provides a concrete example of how an Iranian startup is implementing solutions to the above challenges while trying to capture the economic and cultural opportunity. Founded by Jafar Sadeghi Younesi and Masoumeh Javan Ma’ghoul, this project emerged from the Iranian publishing entrepreneurship scene and was recently honored as one of the “*Top Ideas in the Publishing Industry*” at a national event in November 2025[9]. The core offering of Ketabino can be described as a **SaaS-based digital publishing platform combined with a marketplace and print-on-demand service**. It essentially has two facets: a **publisher-facing side** and a **reader-facing side**:

- For **publishers and authors** (content providers), Ketabino offers a software platform where they can create an account, upload their book files (in EPUB or PDF format), set pricing, and manage sales. The platform provides a **dashboard** with real-time sales analytics, traffic reports, and even an API for batch uploading metadata. This addresses a key gap for Iranian publishers, who previously had limited tools for digital distribution. On Ketabino, a publisher retains full control: they can decide to sell an e-book, enable print-on-demand, or both, and they see transparent statistics on how their titles are performing. Notably, **DRM protection** is applied automatically to any file uploaded, via Radium LCP as discussed. The publisher can choose how many devices or downloads are allowed per purchase, etc., giving them confidence that their digital assets are not left exposed. Importantly, Ketabino’s model is **publisher-friendly in revenue share** – initially taking 0% commission (as a promotional period) and later a modest commission (the business model suggests around 30% on e-books, which would still leave 65% to the publisher after 5% VAT, mimicking standard app store splits). For print-on-demand, the platform’s commission is around 15% of the print cost, with the rest covering printing and going to the publisher. These rates are competitive with or better than existing local e-book platforms (some of which reportedly took higher cuts). By reducing the financial friction, Ketabino aims to **attract a critical mass of content**. Indeed, its strategy to sign up *early-adopter publishers (especially academic presses)* with a **zero commission for the first three months** resulted in over 20 pilot contracts being drafted in its first month of outreach, according to the team’s reports.
- For **readers**, Ketabino presents an online bookstore (web and planned mobile app) where they can discover and purchase books. The platform emphasizes a **direct connection**: marketing itself as “the first zero-commission digital book sales platform – 100% of your payment goes to the author”. This messaging is meant to appeal to readers’ sense of supporting creators. On the site, readers can find titles across various categories (literature, science, business, etc.), with thousands of titles listed as the platform ingests publisher catalogs. A user can buy an e-book and immediately read it in Ketabino’s web reader or app (protected by DRM, so it can’t be copied). Alternatively, if the user prefers a physical book, they can order a printed copy of any title labeled with the “چاپ فوری” (instant print) option. Ketabino has partnered with a digital press such that when a print order comes in, the system sends the file to that print house where a single copy is printed and bound within 1–2 days and then delivered by courier. In Tehran this might mean next-day delivery; outside Tehran, within 72 hours was the target. This effectively gives readers **the convenience of online shopping with the choice of format** – digital or print – for every book. No other Iranian platform had integrated these services in one place as of 2025. Competing e-book apps like Fidibo or Taaghche offer only digital copies (and in fact have been grappling with their own piracy issues, with Taaghche having to briefly shut down in 2023 due to piracy

concerns), and traditional bookstores or publishers do not have on-demand printing for single orders. Thus, Ketabino is filling a novel niche.

Technologically, the Ketabino team built the platform to address Iran's unique needs. We discussed its use of **Radium LCP DRM**, which is a standout feature aligning with international standards (ISO/IEC 23078-2:2024)[13] while remaining implementable under sanctions. The reading software (web reader and planned apps) are compatible with LCP, meaning a user simply enters a passphrase or uses their authenticated account to unlock the purchased book on their device – it's a **user-friendly DRM** that avoids some of the pitfalls of older systems (for instance, it doesn't require constant online verification, respecting user privacy and offline reading). Another aspect is the **integration of analytics and tracking**: because everything is done via the platform, each sale and even each page-read can in theory be tracked (aggregated data is shown to publishers about how many readers opened the book, etc., without violating privacy). This data-centric approach is new in Iran's book market, where traditionally publishers get very limited feedback (e.g., sales figures only after a print run sells out, and no insight into reading behavior). By providing live dashboards, Ketabino gives publishers actionable intelligence – for example, they can see that a certain textbook is getting spikes in purchases at the start of university semesters, or that a novel had many free sample reads but few conversions to purchase (indicating maybe pricing issues). These insights enable a more **agile marketing strategy** for books, which is quite innovative in a market that has been slow to adopt data-driven practices.

From an operational standpoint, one challenge Ketabino faces is **logistics for print-on-demand**. Printing single copies on demand can be costlier per unit than mass printing, and managing deliveries for single books requires coordination. The platform has to ensure that print quality is acceptable and that delivery times are reliable, otherwise readers will not trust the service. To tackle this, the team partnered with a reputable digital printing press in Tehran that already had high-quality presses and could scale up as volume grows. They also negotiated a fixed rate for printing a standard paperback of various page counts, so they could price the POD service in advance. As volume grows, they plan to invest in their own digital press (or additional partners in other cities) to improve efficiency. It's noteworthy that print-on-demand globally benefits from economies of scale on the software side (managing many titles) but less so on the hardware side (each unit still has a base cost). Ketabino's bet is that Iranian readers will pay a premium for single-copy printing for the convenience of getting a book that may be otherwise unavailable; this premium is partly offset by the fact that many POD orders will be for books that **don't exist in print anywhere else** (so there's no cheaper alternative). The success of this model remains to be seen, but global trends (as illustrated by Amazon's success with CreateSpace / KDP Print and services like IngramSpark) indicate there is a substantial demand for POD, especially for backlist and self-published titles.

It is also instructive to compare Ketabino's approach with its **domestic competitors**. The main local e-book platforms are *Fidibo* and *Taaghche*, which operate on a B2C model selling e-books directly to readers. Fidibo, backed by a large retail company (Digikala), has a strong brand and offers e-books and audiobooks with a library of ~40,000 titles. Taaghche has an even larger catalog (~130,000 titles) and a dedicated user base. However, both focus only on digital delivery and use proprietary apps. Neither offers print-on-demand, and neither provides a SaaS dashboard for publishers – instead, they work on classic licensing deals with publishers (taking a cut of sales). In essence, Ketabino is differentiating by serving as a **platform provider (B2B2C)** rather than just a retailer. It gives more control to publishers (closer to a self-service model like Amazon's KDP for independent authors). This differentiation could be a competitive advantage if publishers unhappy with revenue shares or lack of data on other platforms flock to Ketabino. On the flip side, convincing readers to

switch or use multiple apps is tough – Fidibo and Taaghche have years of head start and thousands of users. Ketabino will likely emphasize exclusive content or the print option to lure readers. Its initial focus on academic and scholarly publishers might help it capture a niche that the generalist platforms haven't deeply penetrated: e.g., university press books, specialized non-fiction, etc., which students or researchers need and which could drive them to the platform for that content alone. By the end of its first 6 months, Ketabino aims to have at least **50 publishers and 500+ new book titles** on the platform (as per its roadmap), which would give it a credible library to attract users.

The platform's recognition at the national "Top Publishing Ideas" event also gave it a publicity boost[9]. It was cited as "*a smart combination of digital publishing and print-on-demand*" and lauded for addressing the needs of the industry. Such validation from the Ministry of Culture and the national library authorities is important in Iran – it can facilitate further support, perhaps even grants or inclusion in incubation programs. Being part of the university's entrepreneurship center (the team sought residency in a tech incubator) provides mentorship and credibility. However, it also raises expectations for performance: the team will be monitored on achieving the milestones they pitched (MVP launch, user acquisition, etc.). Thus far, Ketabino is in a **beta phase** (as indicated on its website banner[16]) where the purchasing functions were not fully open to the public as of late 2025, while they finalize technical and legal setup. The coming year will be crucial to see if the platform can move from concept and pilot contracts to a live, revenue-generating service that can compete in the market.

International Comparison and Lessons

In considering the trajectory of Iran's digital publishing, it is useful to compare with international examples – both to gauge how far behind Iran is and to highlight unique innovations that Iran's context has produced. A few comparisons stand out:

United States and Europe: In Western markets, digital publishing grew rapidly in the 2010s with the rise of e-readers and later stabilized. Print books have seen a resurgence such that e-books settle around 20–30% of the market by revenue[1]. Crucially, these markets benefit from strong copyright enforcement (nearly all are Berne Convention members) and a lack of sanctions issues, so piracy, while present, is far less mainstream than in Iran. Consumers in these markets largely obtain e-books through legal platforms (Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, etc.) because it is relatively affordable and convenient, and because pirated options are pushed to marginal, illegal websites. The presence of **ecosystem players** like Amazon means there are vertically integrated services: an author can publish via Amazon KDP and have their e-book sold on Kindle, and simultaneously enable print-on-demand paperback sales via the same platform – very analogous to what Ketabino is attempting, but under one corporate umbrella. The success of Amazon's model demonstrates the power of combining e-book and POD: many independent authors report that offering both formats maximizes their audience and revenue (some readers prefer e-book, others will only buy print). Amazon's global network handles printing in multiple countries, something Ketabino cannot yet do (its POD is domestic). Nonetheless, the principle is similar. One lesson from the US/EU experience is the importance of **user experience and device compatibility**. Kindle's popularity was driven by the seamless device+store integration. Iranian platforms might not have a proprietary device (though some local companies have tried e-readers), but ensuring apps are high-quality and content opens flawlessly on phones/tablets is key to mass adoption.

Developing Markets and China: Perhaps more instructive are cases like **China, India, or other developing countries** where large populations moved to digital reading via mobile devices. China is especially notable – it has a thriving digital publishing scene with over 500

million online literature readers, and many novels are read via mobile apps (often in serialized format). China's rate of e-book adoption is so high that only ~24% of people there bought a print book in recent surveys, implying digital reading is more common[1]. The drivers in China included early investment in mobile reading platforms, a culture of serialization and fan-based content (which got people onto apps), and importantly, government regulation that, while imperfect, did crack down on some piracy and foster licensed platforms. China also developed its **own DRM and formats** (given they have their distinct tech ecosystem), which is analogous to Iran having to use its own DRM solution. One can see Ketabino's approach as somewhat akin to China's Qidian or JD Reading, though on a much smaller scale – those platforms also give authors control to some extent and monetize through both sales and other means (like rewards, subscriptions). Another relevant point is pricing: in India and China, e-books are very cheap (sometimes a few cents or accessible via subscription models) to compete with piracy and to match lower purchasing power. Iran may likewise need to experiment with **subscription models** or very low pricing for digital content to undercut the incentive to pirate. The Ketabino business model currently focuses on sales/commission, but in the future they might introduce something like an “all-you-can-read” monthly plan to attract more readers (provided they can get publishers on board with the idea).

Copyright and Policy Regimes: Virtually all countries that succeeded in digital publishing had legal structures to support it. Even Russia, which historically had high piracy, saw improvements after implementing stricter laws and site-blocking for pirate sites. Iran's lack of international copyright is a unique handicap; perhaps a closer parallel is a country like **Vietnam** or **Indonesia** in past decades, where book piracy was common and legal frameworks were still maturing. Those markets improved when they joined global treaties and when local companies partnered with international publishers. In Iran's case, partnership with international publishers is currently limited (due to sanctions and the legal gap). However, one interesting angle is **export of Persian content**: If Ketabino can secure rights to Iranian works and then later Iran joins Berne or sanctions ease, it could potentially supply Persian e-books to global stores, effectively becoming an aggregator for Persian content. This was done by some Eastern European digital publishers post-Iron Curtain – they built catalogs and then, once integrated into global systems, they acted as the gateway for their literature to the world. It may be a long-term vision, but it's culturally significant for Iran's publishing influence.

Technology adoption: Internationally, the use of **standardized formats and interoperability** has been important. The adoption of EPUB as a standard, for example, enabled many companies to build on it. Ketabino's use of an ISO-standard DRM (LCP) aligns well with this global trend, meaning if someday Iranian e-books were to be available on, say, a European library system, the fact that they use LCP (which many libraries and stores support) would make it easier. This forward-looking choice shows Iranian developers leveraging open technology to ensure they are not isolated in the long run. In contrast, had they built a completely proprietary format, it might lock them (and their users) in a silo. The international lesson is clear: **interoperability and openness** can be a competitive advantage, especially under constraints.

Finally, the experiences of other countries emphasize the role of **government and industry support**. In many countries, publishers initially resisted e-books, fearing cannibalization of print. Over time they adapted, often with help from industry associations or government initiatives that educated stakeholders and set guidelines. Iran's government, through entities like the Ministry of Culture (Ershad) and organizations like the House of Book, has started to show support for digital publishing initiatives. The event that Ketabino won was co-organized by the national publishing authorities, indicating at least a recognition at high

levels that “the path to the future of publishing is through technology” (as one official at the event noted, “نشر از مسیر فناوری می‌گذرد”, meaning “*publishing goes through technology*”[17][18]). Such public endorsements and perhaps future policy incentives (e.g. grants, incubator spaces, or anti-piracy enforcement) will be crucial for scaling up what startups like Ketabino are doing. Internationally, when publishers and tech companies collaborate – rather than see each other as enemies – the digital transition goes much smoother. The hope is that Iranian publishers will view platforms like Ketabino not as a threat but as a partner that can help them modernize and reach new readers.

Conclusion

Iran stands at a crossroads in its publishing industry. On one hand, there are strong headwinds: entrenched habits of piracy, outdated legal frameworks, and the ever-looming cloud of international sanctions. On the other hand, there is a young and eager readership, a clear demand for more accessible content, and emerging local innovators bringing global best practices to the country. The experience of the MANA/Ketabino project demonstrates that with creativity and determination, it is possible to begin closing the gap between Iran’s publishing sector and the rest of the world. By tackling economic inefficiencies (through print-on-demand) and cultural barriers (through community-building and open-standard DRM), the platform provides a blueprint for sustainable digital publishing under adverse conditions.

For Iran to fully unlock the **economic benefits**, further steps will be needed beyond individual startups. These include policy changes like formally joining international copyright conventions (to signal respect for IP and facilitate content exchange) and continuing to invest in internet infrastructure so that digital content is readily available across the country. Easing restrictions on e-commerce and banking (or finding creative solutions around them) will also help Iranian platforms participate in the global digital economy, not just the local one. Culturally, a sustained effort in reader education and perhaps new business models (such as affordable subscriptions for students, or freemium models supported by sponsorships) may accelerate the adoption of legal e-reading. The **83% three-year survival rate of incubated startups in the EU** and similar positive stats suggest that if platforms like Ketabino are nurtured in a supportive environment, they have a strong chance of success [user’s data] .

In the wider perspective, Iran’s case offers a unique study in how a publishing industry can strive to modernize *without* the full scaffolding of international integration. The combination of **economic drive and cultural adaptation** on display – a platform that marries commerce with cultural preservation (by making Persian books widely available) – could serve as a model for other regions with similar challenges. As digital and on-demand publishing take root, Iranian authors might find new life for their works, readers might discover content they never had access to, and the industry as a whole could become more resilient and forward-looking. In a country where “book poverty” has been a concern and book readership rates often lamented, the infusion of technology might be the catalyst that was needed to rejuvenate interest in books. The path will not be easy, but the early signs, as evidenced by Ketabino’s launch and recognition[9], indicate that Iran’s publishing entrepreneurs are ready to turn the page to a new chapter – one where digital innovation and cultural enrichment go hand in hand.

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