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### Putting Iran into Print

Book by book, Iranian-American publishers build a business of culture

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A. Kamron Jabbari's Mazda Publishers is celebrating its 30th year in business.

By Jeff Baron  
Staff Writer

Washington — A. Kamron Jabbari has another story to tell.

In a way, Jabbari has made his living telling stories for more than 30 years: As head of [Mazda Publishers](#), one of a handful of Iranian-American book publishing houses, he has been printing other people's scholarship on ancient Persia and modern Iran, other people's Persian cookbooks, even other people's children's books. He has competed for the scholarly books with university presses, for the more popular books with the big publishing houses, and for the rest with the few other Iranian-American publishers. In a world of easy access to the Internet and of bookstores going out of business, Jabbari keeps the presses running.

This story, though, is his own. He had come to the United States to study — aerospace engineering at Pennsylvania State University because every Iranian student is expected to go into engineering or medicine, he said — had a fellowship with NASA, jumped fields to receive a doctorate in economics, and then taught economics at Centre College in Kentucky. He had success and security.

Then came the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the hostage crisis at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. Jabbari organized a three-day symposium at the college to bring together leading scholars on Iran. He knew that what they had to say was important and deserved a wider audience than could be found in the middle of Kentucky, so he assembled a book, *Iran: A Revolution in the Making*. But no publisher was interested.

So Jabbari resigned from the college, cashed in his \$2,200 retirement fund and used it to publish the book himself. He had no salary and no security, but he was in business.

The revolution also put Farhad Shirzad's family in the book business. Nasser Shirzad was an Iranian diplomat in the United States who had no choice but to change careers in 1979. He and his wife, Parvaneh, opened a store, [Iranbooks](#), near Washington. "They started the bookstore, and then we started printing a few books, and we gradually developed into a publishing business," said Farhad Shirzad, their son, who took over the publishing operation, called [Ibex Publishing](#), a few years later. His parents continue to operate the bookstore.

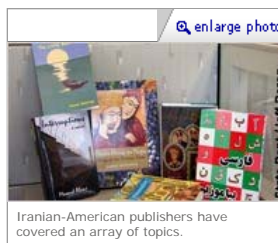
Shirzad said that in the early days, most of the company's books were in Persian: Newly arrived Iranians wanted to read in their native language, and they wanted books that couldn't be published in Iran because of the new Islamic regime's censorship.

Shirzad and Jabbari still publish a few books in Persian, but both said that they, along with their audience, have moved to mostly English. Shirzad said some of his Persian-language books are a matter of prestige, such as the diaries of Assadollah Alam, who served as court minister to Shah Reza Pahlavi, and the memoirs of Ardeshir Zahedi, once the shah's foreign minister. "The problem is that whatever we publish that sells, they publish in Iran. Iran is not a signatory to copyright laws," Shirzad said, and Iranian publishers can produce books more cheaply. What's more, he said, the censorship of books has eased in Iran, though it remains a factor.

Shirzad said that most of his business today comes from textbooks for teaching Persian and from books about the culture — "stuff that appeals to second-

generation, third-generation Iranians who are looking to rediscover their roots." And he said there's a new, non-Iranian audience for those books: "friends, boyfriends, girlfriends of Iranians who are interested in understanding the culture or are interested in communicating with the mother-in-law."

A third publishing house, [Mage Publishers](#), in Washington, has been producing English-language books on Persian food, culture, literature and history since 1985. It is known for the cookbooks of Najmieh Batmanglij, whose husband, Mohammad Batmanglij, is the publisher. Shirzad said Mage does "a very attractive job" with beautifully designed volumes.



Both Shirzad and Jabbari are former scholars, and both publish an extensive collection of scholarly works related to modern Iran and what Jabbari called "greater Iran," the lands and peoples whose histories have been intertwined with that of the Persians: Armenians, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Georgians, Kurds, Jews and others. Jabbari said he typically will send a manuscript to be reviewed by two established scholars before publication to make sure it is worthwhile, and will run a first printing of 1,500 to 2,000 hardbound copies, most of which are purchased by universities and libraries. He plans to publish about 20 titles this year.

Few books turn much of a profit, he said, but "at least we don't come up with a financial loss."

Jabbari, whose business is now based in Southern California, said the large university presses have some advantages over his: They don't have to turn a profit, and would-be professors hope that they will have a better chance of finding a job at the university that publishes their books.

But he said his business also has some advantages. It won't let a title "get lost," which he said can happen in a university publishing house that produces 200 books a year. "We can do just as wonderful a job in getting that book out into the reader's hands," he said. And he said he also can help authors find grants to support them in their work.

The publishers said they relish their freedom to print works they admire even if they're not sure of a profit. Jabbari said his Blind Owl Press imprint features writers whose works have been censored in their home countries, "just to give the authors a chance to be recognized."

Shirzad said the decision on a book can be purely personal: "If I feel that it'll break even, even if there's no profit in it, I'll publish it. It also depends on whether I like the author."

Both men said they have had surprises, good and bad. Shirzad offered a few hard lessons: "I've discovered that books on political science don't sell at all, or very little." Also: "There are more people writing poetry than buying poetry." Also: "A shy author is not very useful."

On the plus side, he said, he has learned that a good title, especially a clear one, will sell a book. Even before *How to Speak, Read and Write Persian* came out, people were trying to buy it, simply on the basis of the title, though he had similar books in his catalog.

Jabbari said that what started as a bilingual cookbook, *Persian Cooking*, is now in English only and has become his biggest seller. And *Concise History of the Armenian People* has been adopted as a textbook in many university courses, with even a Spanish-language edition for the Latin American market.

Jabbari said authors should remember, though, that not every book is worth publishing. After he left his job as a professor, he said, he wrote a novel: *All the Shah's Men*. He even registered it with the Library of Congress. And with the benefit of his 30 years of experience in the book business, he offered this judgment on his book: "It's just a piece of junk."

Jabbari will stick to publishing other people's stories.

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