

Tehran: Paradox City

Research >
Central Asia

Over two hundred years, decreasing mortality rates and an influx of migrants transformed Tehran from a 7.5 square kilometre city of 15,000 inhabitants into a mega-city of ten million sprawling over 600 square kilometres. Having subsumed flatlands to the east and west and seventy villages on its adjacent mountain slopes, today's Tehran varies 800 metres in elevation from south to north. The city's topographical variation is paralleled by the marked differences in class and life-style of its inhabitants. All of Iran's urban and pastoral nomadic areas are represented in Tehran's population, as are the country's religious minorities: Zoroastrians, Jews, Armenians, and Assyrian Christians.

By Soheila Shahshahani

To the differences in culture and geographical origin of Tehran's inhabitants, we can add political tensions: modernization, nationalism, monarchy and religion collided in the modern city. Tehranis have witnessed two revolutions, the toppling of two monarchies, and a number of assassinations. Urban life has thus come to be associated with hope for progress, but also with fear of tension and chaos.

The same can be said about Tehran's history of urban development. While early changes included the destruction of the old city's gates and fortifications, these were replaced with the new symbols of modern governance, massive ministerial and military buildings. Universities, banks, boulevards and huge statued squares were built, the squares and the universities containing elements of opposition to religious authority. Architects were either brought in from Europe and the United States, or they were Iranians who had studied abroad or had graduated from Dar al-Fonun (Polytechnic of Iran, established 1851).

Tehran was built to different architectural tastes without a cohesive urban plan. As the city outgrew its previous limits, land ownership emerged as a serious problem. In 1918 the first legal act regarding land registration was passed. The transition from traditional ownership following Shari'a or royal decree to modern legal ownership became the source of widespread corruption. The monarchy, military, various ministries, banks, the religious foundation of *owqaf*, and influential people registered millions of square meters of land under their names.¹

In 1951 oil was nationalized. Following the defeat of the nationalist Prime Minister Dr Mohammad Mossadeq, the royal tendency was to channel oil wealth to the urban areas, particularly Tehran, at the expense of infrastructure for agriculture and industry. In 1968 Tehran's first urbanization plan, the Tehran Comprehensive Plan (TCP), was officially approved in parliament. A twenty-five year project proposed by Iranian and American firms, the TCP identified problems of density in the city centre, pollution, commercial activities, transportation, unemployment, and migration into the city. The solutions were ambitious: the TCP extended the city limits to reduce concentration in built-up spaces, and established ten districts of 500,000 people, each with its commercial, industrial and high-rise buildings. It further sub-divided areas into neighbourhoods of 15-30,000 people with their own schools and facilities.

Land speculation and construction, however, remained among the most profitable activities in the country. The

legal system related to land continued to allow for its appropriation while its ambiguities encouraged corruption. The increase in the price of oil in the 1970s induced Mohammad Reza Shah to dream of a grand civilization for Iran's future. The project of Shahestan Pahlavi, with ministries, embassies, cultural and recreational centres, built on 554 hectares of land and employing 189,000 people, was to symbolize the future modern city in the heart of Tehran.²

Eleven years after the Tehran Comprehensive Plan, in 1979, the Islamic Revolution shook the city. Two measures were of prime importance in forming the face of the city in the years to come. One was an oral decree by Imam Khomeini that all Tehrani had the right to possess a house. This ignored the city limits set by the TCP and, overnight, small houses were built on the outskirts of the city. The second was the government's decree, in 1989, after the war with Iraq, that different sectors of the government had to become economically self-sufficient. This encouraged the municipality to allow, and then fine, illegal buildings. Fines thus became permits and buildings were constructed in ways that were not permitted by law.

Old gardens and mansions were destroyed to clear space for massive new apartment blocks. Fines for cutting trees or building high-rises brought colossal amounts of money to the municipality. In modernizing the city, the municipality was in the paradoxical situation of planting trees and flowers to make small parks while benefiting from the destruction of the



A non-religious building featuring a dome.

'lungs of Tehran', the gardened northern section of the city. Previously the gardens had brought cool weather down from the mountains, sweeping pollution into the lowlands beyond the city.

Pollution, traffic congestion and accidents thus became facts of daily life. Painting pedestrian crossings white, allowing advertisements to appear on buses and walls, placing billboards along highways and lining streets with

lights and colourful flags for festivities added to the transformation of the city, but not necessarily in welcome ways. Hardly any street-names from before the revolution remained, making people recall previous names or ponder before giving directions. When transformation arrives with paradox, it becomes more incomprehensible: When new mosques lose their domes, and new high-rise buildings gain domes, one loses the bearings of identity. When Tehran University remains the site of Friday prayer 24 years after the Revolution, one wonders about the symbolic meaning of such displacement.

Perhaps these are matters of little importance when compared to what may happen with the next earthquake, which records show strike Tehran every 150 years. Should the epicentre of a major earthquake fall on the city, we can expect immediate casualties in the hundreds of thousands. In a matter of days, millions could die as a result of fire and lack of facilities. Who would bear responsibility for neglecting the necessary precautions for such an eventuality?

Every year, during the many holidays, particularly during the long New Year holiday which marks the beginning of spring, the Tehrani, like the inhabitants of all mega-cities, leave Tehran. The city breathes, its arteries cleared of congestion, and under the blue sky and at the foot of the magnificent Alborz mountains the city has time to reflect upon the two hundred years which have transformed it to hold what was then the entire population of Iran. <

Bibliography

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Both photos by Soheila Shahshahani

A modern mosque without the traditional dome.

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- 1 *Owqaf*: is money or property that wealthy citizens allocated to the poor and to religious students and dignitaries.
- 2 Shahestan Pahlavi was one of the most important urbanization projects of the Pahlavi period, using the investment funds for urbanism of the whole country for ten years. A British firm designed the project, which was to cover over 550 hectares of land on the hills of central Tehran.