

Navigating the Politics of Planning Large-Scale Urban Projects in Capital Cities: Insights from Tehran

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, political and economic elites have increasingly relied on large-scale urban projects to enhance urban competitiveness and stimulate economic growth. To bring this urban vision to life, megaprojects (Kennedy et al., 2011) have become a crucial component of city planning. These projects have proliferated globally as urban responses to development and innovation pressures, serving as infrastructure for globalization and neoliberalism. In many cities of the Global South, particularly in capital cities, these projects also serve the purpose of symbolic representational transformation. They have become particularly effective tools for restoring global visibility to regions and cities with distinct (often authoritarian) political identities ([Grubbauer 2013](#), [del Cerro Santamaria, 2019](#)). Megaprojects have been defined in various ways, with no common agreement on a single definition (Greiman, 2023). Within urban studies, Megaprojects defined by their complexity, the scale of new construction or rehabilitation, the involvement of multiple state and non-state actors, their exceptional status in policy and planning, the transformation of land use in a single contiguous area, the extended time required for completion, and the high cost of development ([Sutherland, Sim & Scott, 2014](#); Fainstein, 2009; Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius, & Rothengatter, 2003; van Marrewijk, Clegg, Pitsis, & Veenswijk, 2008). The development of megaprojects has, however, been controversial, raising questions about their magnitude and consequent effects on large areas of the city, their significant economic cost, and their massive environmental impact. These factors often lead to civil society's mistrust and doubts about the long-lasting benefits of such large-scale projects for citizens (Hannan, 2012; Robbins, 2014; Scott et al., 2006).

In the Middle East and North African (MENA) region, large-scale urban developments and grand urban visions are not new phenomena. Since the early 20th century, these projects have become tools for nation-building and promoting the image of modern cities to a global audience. For example, Frank Lloyd Wright's plan for Greater Baghdad in 1957 aimed to modernize Baghdad's historic core, and the 1952 Kuwait Master Plan (KMP) designed by the British firm Minoprio sought to rebuild and expand Kuwait City's road system and redevelop the old town (Mashayekhi and Beiruti, 2024; Alraqam, 2015). Nevertheless, with the boom in oil prices in the 1970s and 1980s and the growing influence of neoliberalism in various parts of the region since the early 1990s, new forms of megaprojects have emerged. These projects are envisioned as competitive tools, transforming the image of regions and cities to reflect 'modernity,' 'progress,' and 'development' (Deboulet, 2010). Historians and urban scholars have been studying large-scale urban development projects in various countries in the MENA region, situating these projects within the larger processes of modernisation, globalization and neoliberal reform. However there has been limited studies on complex political, social and economic relations behind the production of large-scale urban projects especially in capital cities. Koenraad Bogaert book *Globalized Authoritarianism: Megaprojects, Slums, and Class Relations in Urban Morocco*, is among few studies that demonstrates how capital cities and large-scale developments are 'laboratories where modalities of government are

transformed or re-invented in relation to particular interests, specific balances of power, struggle and resistance' ([2015](#)).

The objective in this chapter is to use mega-project development as a lens to critically analyse the relationship between the production of urban space and the power structure of the political regime behind the building of Tehran, the capital city. Through an in-depth analysis of the various historical phases of the Abbas-Abad mega-project in Tehran, this chapter demonstrates that city-making practices, especially in capital cities, not only reflects the political projects of the state and relations between multiple powerful public and private actors but also serves as a primary tool through which the state apparatus consolidates its power and authority and maintains its legitimacy. Moreover, this chapter argues that the Islamic Republic has used large-scale development projects as a tool to maintain its political dominance in Tehran and beyond, and to some extent, repair weak state-society relations particularly during the times of social unrest and dissatisfaction.

The case of Tehran is particularly interesting for this study, as it has experienced radical socio-spatial and political transformations over the past decades due to the 1979 revolution, war and geopolitical conflicts, international economic sanctions, and various social uprisings and movements. Additionally, throughout this time, urban governance of Tehran was directly influenced by polarised political structure of Iran – which combines authoritarian and democratic practices, and where sovereignty is divided between elected and unelected executives. Focusing on the Abbas-Abad mega-project that undergone multiple phases of development since 1973 until 2016 would provide an opportunity to reveal the complex processes and contested discourses of multiple actors in the production of space in Tehran. In this chapter, I examine four key stages of the Abbas-Abad development and demonstrate how the development trajectory of this megaproject, across different periods, was shaped by a complex interaction between the official state project of development and the needs and interests of opposing groups who either competed for political power or saw themselves as socially marginalized or politically underrepresented.

To contextualise these issues, I begin by reviewing and situating my argument within a broader literature on urban politics of capital cities in the MENA region and focusing on development of mega-projects in the authoritarian context. In the second part, I investigate the different phases of planning and managing the Abbas-Abad mega development. I explain how new spatial tactics and strategies emerged in each phase as a response to socio-political and economic transformations, with the intention of sustaining political dominance and state legitimacy. The third part focuses on the interactions between civil society demands and decision-making stakeholders during an ongoing project. In this section, I build on the recent work of Tom Goodfellow and David Jackman (2022) - *Controlling the Capital: Political Dominance in the Urbanizing World*. They argue that capital cities are crucial political sites, particularly for authoritarian regimes in Africa and Asia in recent decades, serving both as centres of political control by governing elites and as stages for political contestation by citizens. Using the case of Abbas Abad megaproject, I show how the development of this project became a tool not only for entering into the global competitiveness of capital cities but also for reconciling state-society relations and maintaining the dominance of the political regime. The chapter concludes by reflecting on how megaprojects factor into local and regional politics and what sets them apart from other projects on the national and regional scale.

Finally, this chapter is based on research involving a combination of methods, such as: a review of relevant literature, direct on-site observations, informant interviews with architects and planners involved in development of the project, analysis of planning documents and reports and media coverage. The fieldwork took place in two different periods in 2017 and 2024.

2. Urban Megaprojects and Authoritarian Urban Practices in Capital City

Capital cities hold significant importance globally as they symbolize political sovereignty, serve as residences for political elites, drive economic growth, and often accommodate a large portion of the urban population. They also present significant political opportunities for both ruling governments and their opponents. In the Middle East, capital cities have experienced major urban and socio-political changes, particularly since the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s (Krijnen and Fawaz, 2010; Deboulet, 2010; Bogaert, 2018). In various parts of the region, internal and external forces such as rapid urban growth, neoliberal globalization, wars and geopolitical conflicts have increasingly contributed to the transformation of the urban landscape in capital cities. The political challenges associated with governing capital cities in the Middle East have become particularly acute, as the residents of these cities can no longer endure the inequitable allocation of resources, rising prices of land and housing, traffic congestion, severe pollution, and water and electricity shortages. In recent decades, various urban protests and social uprisings, such as the Arab Spring, are evidence of residents' dissatisfaction, hoping to bring change and reclaim their right to the city. Yet rather than attending the problems, the political regime and policy makers have imposed new modalities of surveillance, beautification schemes, and grandiose urban projects as strategies to respond to socio-spatial injustices and dominate capital cities (Goodfellow and Jackman, 2022:19). In some cases, such as Tehran and Cairo, political elite promoted and implemented the idea of moving the capital as a solution to every socio-economic and political problem.

The shift towards authoritarianism in many major cities in Africa and Asia in recent decades, despite citizens' demands for democratic change, has led to renewed scholarly attention on the political role of capital cities. Goodfellow and Jackman (2022) argue that the transition to authoritarianism in Africa and Asia since the 21st century has been mostly analysed at the national scale, while the key role of subnational places, especially capital cities, has remained understudied. They offer an important analysis of several capital cities in Africa and South Asia, demonstrating how authoritarianism manifests within the specific context of these cities and how these cities simultaneously produce and resist authoritarianism. Within Middle Eastern studies, extensive body of literature examines urban protest and democracy movements in major cities and brutal repression of citizens by ruling regimes on city streets of Cairo, Istanbul and Tehran (Bayat, 2009; xxx). However, less attention has been given to the impact of authoritarian practices on the urban landscape and spatial reconfiguration of cities, especially capital cities, with some important exceptions (for example, Bogaert, 2018, 2022; Koch 2018, 2022). By analysing various urban mega-projects in Rabat and Casablanca, Bogaert argues that neoliberal reform of 1980s had a profound impact on authoritarian government and in a way justifies the authoritarian mode of government. He shows while economic liberalization and 'market reform initially promised to undermine the power

structures of authoritarian states, it is clear today that authoritarianism has persisted and transformed in new globalized forms' (2022: 188).

In line with Bogaert research in Morocco, in this chapter, I argue that it is crucial to take a more dynamic perspective on urban megaproject realization in Middle Eastern cities, focusing on how political and economic parameters and actors' interests evolve over the stages of a project delivery lifecycle. In the case of Tehran and the Abbas-Abad project, I particularly analyse how political and economic shifts in different periods (1973-2012) influenced the planning approach and outcome. This is especially important in the context of the Middle East, where the dominant narrative on urban megaproject development has been shaped by the 'Dubai model,' which highlights high-tech iconic architecture, consumerism, and top-down planning (Barthel, 2010). This approach hinders the understanding of the complex socio-political dynamics involved in the design and realization of megaprojects in context such as Iran. Therefore, in this research, I push this narrative one step further by delving deeper into the socio-political dynamics behind megaproject development to gain a better understanding of state political tactics and authoritarian practices in planning and constructing these types of projects in the capital city. The findings of this chapter will contribute to the wider discussion on space and power and address different scales and spatial expressions of authoritarianism in capital cities.

3. Historical trajectories: Socio-Spatial Politics and Abbas Abad Hill Development 1973-2012

The urban transformation of Tehran during the Pahlavi monarchy (1925-1979) was directly influenced by the nationalist ideology of the Pahlavi state and the secular nationalist political elite, who aimed to develop Iran through top-down modernization and Westernization policies. The rise in global oil prices in the early 1970s and the resultant increase in oil revenues positioned Iran among the top twenty economies in the world and brought confidence for the state to initiate large-scale urban projects. With wealth concentrated in Tehran, the city's industry and services experienced phenomenal growth (Mashayekhi, 2019). Tehran's population jumped from 2.7 million in 1966 to 4.5 million in 1976 (Madanipour, 2006). Hence, major urban renewal and infrastructure development projects were proposed to control and accommodate the rapid growth and expansion of the city. New highways and boulevards and shopping malls, cinemas, secular schools and universities, new administrative buildings, public landmarks and monuments have changed the spatial pattern of the city in a short time.

However, Tehran had become an extremely divided city, with the middle and upper classes concentrated in the northern part of the city and the working class and poor in the south. This contrast was very much manifested in urban spaces of the city. In contrast to modern buildings and residential neighbourhoods in northern parts of Tehran, traditional courtyard housing and Bazaar (economic centre of the city) were characteristic of the central and south of the city. The continued migration from other cities and villages to the capital city created increasing pressure of the land and housing market. Large traditional houses in the centre and south of the city,

once the homes of well-to-do families, were subdivided to accommodate the influx of new arrivals. In 1976, some 22,000 households in these areas had seven or more people living in one room (Costello, 1998). These numbers created a significant challenge for the state, which promised modern infrastructure and economic development that would produce a high quality of life for everyone in Tehran.

3.1. 'Shahestan' a new political centre for modern Tehran (1973-1979)

The political agenda to build a modern, prosperous and international capital city gave rise to the conception of a new Central Business District (CBD) for Tehran, known as Shahestan Pahlavi. The project aimed to re-position Tehran as a new international player in global political and economic networks. By grouping together political, economic and cultural activities in a vast 544-hectare undeveloped areas of Abbas-Abad in the north of the historic centre (figure. 1). The availability of large-scale undeveloped land was a rare advantage for the rapid development of the project, as it eliminated the need for negotiations with residents and relocation. The lure of petrodollars attracted foreign planners and shaped a complex constellation of local and foreign actors including British planner Richard Llewelyn-Davies, American planner Jaquelin Robertson, and American institutional actors such as the deputy directors of New York and Manhattan projects (Hakimi-Jad, 2018). Although the realization of such an ambitious project did require foreign expertise, the engagement of these big-name actors was arguably principally to advertise Tehran as a major world capital (Abbas-Abad report 1972).

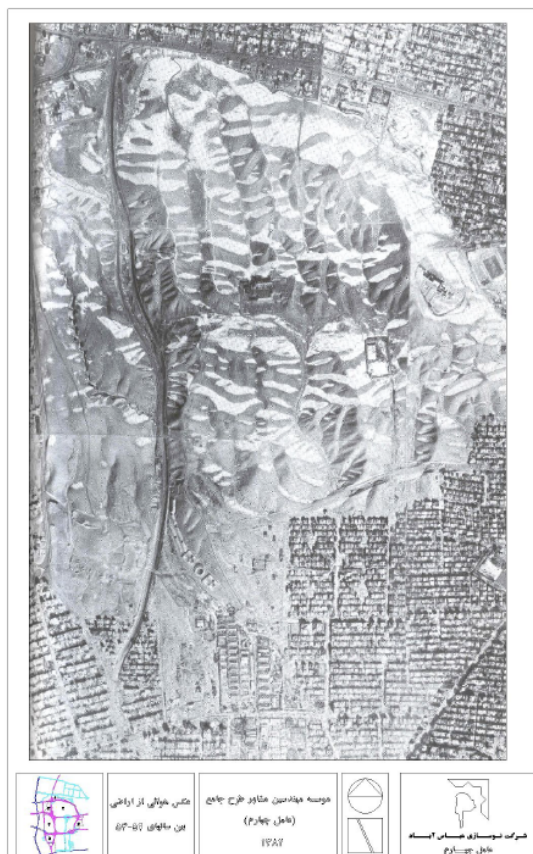


Figure. 1. Aerial photo of Abbas Abad site in 1973, source: Abbas-Abad management company report, 2006. Accessed 2024

The Shah leveraged Iran's oil boom to launch his "Great Civilization" concept, aiming to transform Iran into a modern global power. The changing political and economic conditions in 1973 influenced the design of the Abbas-Abad site, with the Shah's agenda pushing for a new identity for Tehran. Local politicians believed that developing Abbas-Abad would elevate Tehran to a major world capital. Municipality of Tehran as the primary owner of the land and Mayor of Tehran, Nikpay (1969-1977), oversaw the project with the aim of making Abbas-Abad area a significant national and regional hub (Emami, 2014; Costello, 1998). These grandiose ideas manifested itself in the plan for the project 'Shahestan Pahlavi' designed with references to historic capitals like Persepolis of ancient Iran and Isfahan of the Safavids, when Iranian capital cities symbolized national prosperity and pride (Emami, 2014; Costello, 1998).

The project master plan envisioned the construction of high-rise buildings, offices, hotels, banks, luxury apartments, museums, government ministries, and state departments alongside two major boulevards. Upon completion, this would provide the new central business and administrative district for Tehran (Figure X) (Emami, 2014). The main three-lined King Boulevard; "a ceremonial parade route", lined with mostly residential towers, leads to a 'Shah and Nation Square'. It was to accommodate the so-called Pahlavi Monument which – according to the 1976 consultancy report of LDI¹, was "a monument to his Imperial Majesty the Shahanshah, and to the Pahlavi dynasty, in the form of a 30 metre high freestanding portal" [...] "His Majesty the Shahanshah will be able to review major ceremonial events, such as national parades" [...] "At this monument, visiting dignitaries and VIPs will be able to pay their respects to Iran's past". Hence the plan of Shahestan represent a magnificent political and economic centre with the logic of oil empire and the image of tradition (or past) as a symbol and cultural veneer.

The Shahestan project was not only intended to attract international attention but also served as a space to showcase the power of the state and the leadership of the Shah as an agent of change dictating the meaning of 'modern' urbanity, defining the public sphere, and supressing opposing ideologies – coming from Shia clerics and Bazaari merchants - who sought in different ways to define the nation and organise its spaces. This is evident in the plan, which centered around the creation of a massive urban square known as 'Shah and Nation Square,' comparable in size to Tiananmen Square in Beijing. The planners envisioned it as a national centre for the 20th century, drawing comparisons to the proportions and arcades of sixteenth-century Isfahan (Figure.2) (Emami, 2014; Mashayekhi, 2019). Hence the logic of planning remains arbitrary and oriented towards an imaginary future, yet it attempts to substitute cultural spectacle for the genuine connection between people and city's public spaces.

¹ Llewelyn-Davies consultant - Designed by British developers of Llewelyn Davies International

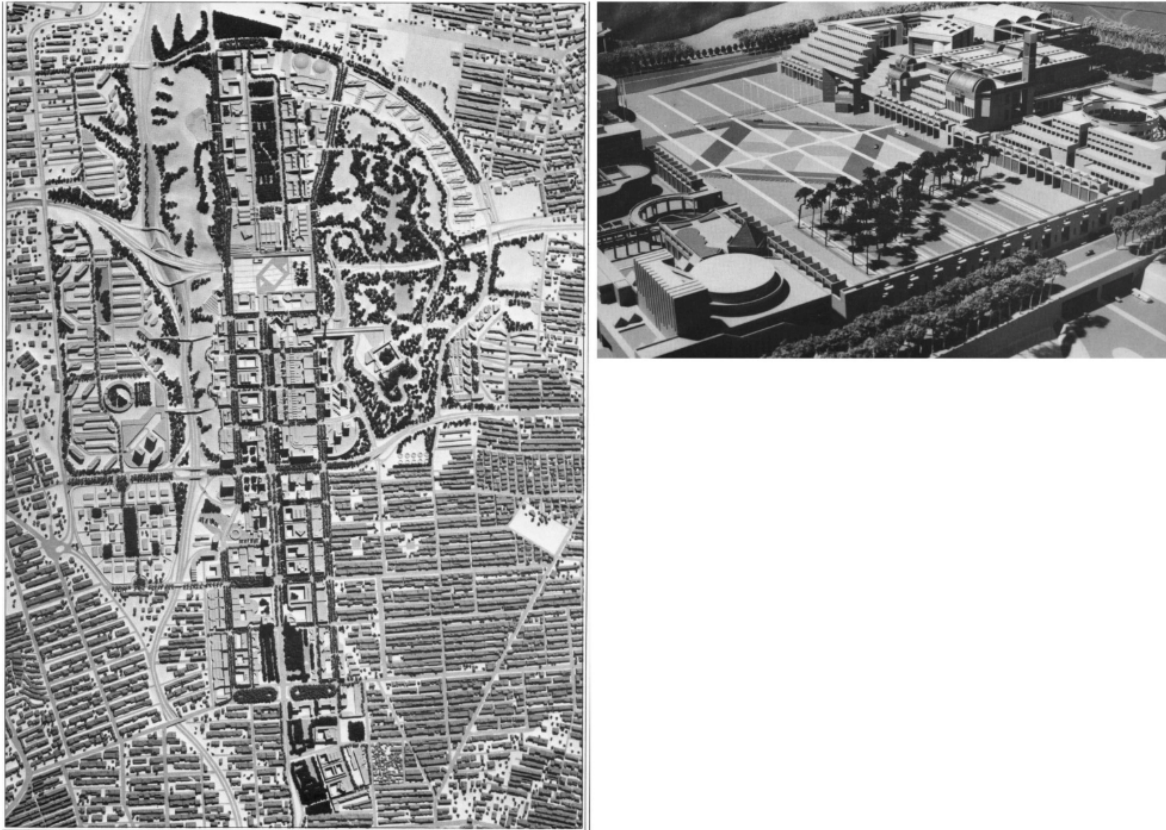


Figure.2. The Shahestan master plan on the right – on the top left design of the ‘Shah and Nation’ square. Source: Shahestan Pahlavi, a New City Centre for Tehran, Report by Liewelyn-Davies International, planning consultants, vol. 2. 1976.

However, the plan was challenged by various opposing groups, including Bazaari merchants (traditional business associations), Islamist groups, and urban activists, who questioned the impact of the project in pushing the poor and working class to the margins of the city and accentuating existing inequalities at both the city and regional scale. They argued that the plan is politically motivated and mainly caters to the needs of secular middle and upper classes who aspire to live in a modern, world-class city. Hence instead of addressing the various social and urban problems at the historic core and Tehran’s periphery, the Shah and Mayor Nikpay invested in the Shahestan mega-project as a solution to the capital’s growing social and urban problems and as a means to assert more dominance. Despite resistance and criticism from various groups, construction of the project began in 1975. However, it was soon halted by the economic and political crises of the late 1970s and the eruption of street protests that led to the 1979 revolution.

3.2. 1980-1994: Islamisation of Capital city, Abbas Abad as a site of prayer

The 1979 Islamic Revolution was the first revolution in the 20th century to advocate for revivalist religious ideologies that rejected Western ideologies – whether democratic or Marxist – and to insist that an indigenous religion (in this case, Islam) had all the elements needed to build an egalitarian and progressive nation (Keddie, 1985). Post-1979 the Islamic elite and revolutionaries attempted to accommodate modernity within a sense of authentic Islamic identity, culture, and historical

experience (Mirsepassi, 2000), a turning inward to indigenous values was reflected in the utopian and popular revolution's motto: 'Neither East (socialist) nor West (capitalist), but Islamic Republic!' – intended to reject the two rival models of modernity and development and find a 'third way' (Khatam, 2015: 6).

The 1979 Revolution led to the establishment of an Islamic government where religious clerics held significant power and influence over government policies and decisions. Religion, specifically Twelver Shia Islam, became central to the political and social framework. The ideological premises of the Islamic Republic were outlined from the outset as a hybrid commitment to Islamism, developmentalism, social justice, cultural conservatism, representative politics, and authoritarian paternalism (Ehsani, 1999). Therefore, in the aftermath of revolution, the identity of the new nation was no longer based on economic power but rather on an ideological vision of a common future, characterized by shared political and cultural traits that are anti-Western and anti-imperialist.

The spatial manifestation of this new identity was traceable in the attitude of the state towards the urban development particularly in the capital were almost all urban renewal projects, including the Tehran master plan and the Shahestan project, were criticized and put on hold by Islamist revolutionaries for their connections to the political agenda of the previous government, labelling them as corrupt and Western (Mashayekhi, 2019). In early 80s in line with the Islamic egalitarian and anti-western development policies of new government the Tehran municipality stopped implementation of unfinished urban projects across the city and instituted a number of symbolic and material revisions. In the case of the Shahestan project, the municipality renamed it to the Abbas-Abad project (the original name of the site) and followed the command of Ayatollah Khomeini and the then President Sayyid Ali Khamenei to allocate 220 hectares of Abbas-Abad land for the construction of the Grand Mosque of Tehran (now known as Grand Musalla or Imam Khomeini Musalla) - The world's second-largest mosque, following the Imam Reza Shrine in Mashhad. The objective was to build a major cultural and Islamic center for the capital and nation.² As a result, the ownership of the land became divided between two different organisation; Tehran Friday Prayer Headquarters, *Byte Rahbari* (Office of the Supreme Leader), and the Abbas Abad Renovation Company.

While the state ideology in the new post-revolution era differs significantly from the former regime, they still aspire to develop a symbolic project at the Abbas-Abad site. This time, it is envisioned as a grand Islamic-cultural center for the global gaze. However, the outbreak of the Iraq-Iran war (1980-88) and the influx of a large population of immigrants into Tehran led to uncontrolled expansion of the city's borders and the accumulation and disappearance of empty lands. During this period, the lands of Abbas Abad were used solely for the construction of the mosque, the creation of squares for congregational prayers, and the formation of temporarily camp for a war prisoners at the former location of the Abbas Abad Renovation Company. Despite state interest and investment in building the Grand Musalla as a

² <https://www.irna.ir/amp/6355089/> - Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Records and Memories of 1982*, 158. Islamic Republic of Iran, *Tehran's Mosalla Plan*.

center for weekly political and religious gatherings with significant impacts on public opinion, financial and technical limitations put the project on hold for several years. It took more than 30 years for the project to be built, and it is still not fully completed to this day.

The Grand Musalla was designed in 1986 by Iranian architect Parviz Moaid, who studied architecture at Sorbonne University in Paris. Upon receiving the award, the architect received a letter from Ayatollah Khomeini noting:

“God willing, you will be successful in building the Tehran Mosque and in creating a vision of anti-blasphemy for Muslims. In addition, the simplicity of the mosque should be a reminder of the simplicity of the place of worship of Muslims in the early days of Islam, and the glamor of the buildings of American Islamic mosques should be strictly avoided. May God approve of all those involved in establishing mosques of Allah.” (Letter, April 1986 – Jamaran news website³).

Ayatollah Khomeini's message emphasizing simplicity and modesty for the grandiose mosque, which occupies 63 hectares of land, is primarily intended to legitimize the construction of the mosque in the eyes of the public and to distinguish the development aspirations of the Islamic Republic from those of the Pahlavi state.



Figure 3. Grand Mosque of Tehran.

³ <https://www.jamaran.news/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1-11/19422-%D9%85%D8%B5%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%DA%AF%D8%B0%D8%B1-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%85>

By the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, the situation became more complex, and Abbasabad was further fragmented both spatially and politically. Spatially, the site was divided by the addition of two new East-West highways. Politically, as a result of state privatization policies in the 1990s, the Tehran Municipality faced serious budget cuts, which led to the transfer and sale of sections of land to other organizations such as the Central Bank of Iran, the Ministry of Road and Urban Development, the Ports and Maritime Organization of Iran, the Tehran Provincial Government, and the Railways of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Moreover, as a result of eight years of war, which caused a recession in the country's development, and the anti-Western attitude of the Islamic government, which neglected investing in urban renewal projects, Tehran's inner-city area was deteriorating, not only in terms of quality of life but also in terms of its status as the capital city and as the country's largest political, social, economic, and industrial centre. By 1990, Tehran, with a population of nearly seven million people, was polluted, overcrowded, spatially fragmented, and suffering from a lack of transport networks and municipal services. Limited funding and profound problems even led the government and assorted experts to debate the possibility of moving the capital elsewhere and building a new one (Ehsani, 2006).

3.3. 1995-2003: Entrepreneurial urbanism and branding the capital city as Modern Islamic capital

Following the Iraq-Iran war in the 1990s and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the diverse factions that Khomeini had held together with his personal charisma rapidly disintegrated (Ehsani, 2006). The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the bipolar world system brought an ideological crisis for the Islamic Republic, forcing it to reconsider its utopian motto of "neither west, nor east, but the Islamic Republic." In 1989, a major realignment occurred under the newly elected president Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, a businessman by profession and a clergyman by avocation. Rafsanjani aimed to redefine the status of the Islamic Republic and spearheaded a movement to revamp the economy towards liberalization, privatization, and global participation, inspired by an Asian model of development (Amuzegar, 2004). His administration, self-identified as "constructionists," labelled their faction "the reconstruction administration." The new government believed that maintaining the Islamic Republic's political and economic independence in a post-Cold War world required the cultivation of technical expertise, economic efficiency, and a culture of entrepreneurship (Harris, 2015).

In the 1990s, Iran's development policies were influenced by the Chinese and Malaysian models, which were popular among East Asian countries for their privatization and deregulation trends. As Khatam (2015) notes, the Asian economic model was seen as free from the negative aspects of colonial capitalism and imperialism, making it ideal for reinventing developmentalism without referencing Western secular or democratic modernities. For Iran which was isolated internationally since 1979 revolution the strategy of 'Looking East' was deployed to establish new pathways to connect globally, and Malaysia was one of the first countries helped facilitate this. In 1994, Iranian President Rafsanjani visited Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir (1981–2003) to explore their national progress and admired Mahathir's 'Vision 2020'—a plan to fully modernize and develop the country by the year 2020 through the construction of numerous mega-projects, such as the Petronas Towers (until recently the tallest building in the world). This exchange between two oil-

producing countries coincided with a strong resurgence of political Islam in many Muslim-majority countries, such as Indonesia, Turkey, and Egypt. This resurgence led to the adoption of Islamic idioms in the architecture and urbanism of cities, particularly capital cities, to project a new Islamized national identity and closer integration with Islamic world (Moser, 2012).

The entrepreneurial ideology of Rafsanjani's administration and Tehran's Mayor Karbaschi (1989-1998), coupled with their shared vision to transform Iran's global image into that of a progressive Islamic nation, significantly influenced Tehran's development policy and agenda for years to come. Despite the political struggles between Islamist conservatives and reformists during the 1990s, the reformist party maintained control of both central and local governments, bolstered by substantial social support and votes. The reformist party's aspiration was to transform the national identity from an undeveloped, inward-looking nation under an Islamic theocratic state to a progressive, transnational Islamic identity. Moreover, they were aware of the aspirations of Tehran's middle class and their demands for a better quality of urban life, such as improved public spaces, infrastructure, and services across the city. Hence, the new plan for Tehran's development centered around making the city more attractive, or at least comparable with the 'world-class' aesthetics associated with cities like Kuala Lumpur or Singapore. This included the development of large-scale urban projects, making the city greener with better public spaces, improving garbage and sewage management, attracting well-known developers and investors in luxury residential and commercial developments, and relocating and renovating government buildings.

In keeping with the ideological orientation of the reformist government, Abbas-Abad project (formerly known as Shahestan) was considered as a valuable land to showcase the progressive Islamic identity of the nation. However, by the mid-90s, the Abbas-Abad land had lost its unity and become divided among powerful political actors, complicating the prospect of achieving consensus for developing a single grand future vision for the site. On the one hand municipality under reformist progressive mayorship plan to limit the expansion of Grand Mosque and develop new iconic cultural and administrative buildings in the northern parts such as National Library and Archives of Iran. On the other hand, the pro-Musalla and political actors connected to Office of the Supreme Leader (*Byte Rahbari*) and conservative party, had occupied and fenced the Northern borders of Grand Musalla to protect their land from any other construction than Islamic institutes (ref. xx – planning perspective article).

Despite the political tension on the ground, the Municipality and Abbas-Abad Complex Management Company strived to make new proposals for Abbasabad. Between 1998 and 2005, three different plans were drawn up for the Abbasabad site, involving various well-known local architecture firms and engineering consultancies. In 1997, the engineering consultancy ATEC was commissioned by the municipality to develop a new plan for a modern center for the capital. The vision of the ATEC plan was to propose various cultural, recreational, and administrative activities within green open spaces, taking into account the topography of the land and the large highways cutting through the site. The ATEC plan, supported by the Ministries, was released with a visionary approach, disregarding the expectations and claims of the political actors who were in favour of expanding the Grand mosque site. (reference to ATEC plan report)

In this plan by ATEC architecture and planning firm, significant areas are allocated to green public spaces, with almost no attention given to the presence of the Grand Mosque, the largest and most significant architectural and urban element under construction in the southern parts of the site. Unlike the pre-revolution plan, the planners did not propose any symbolic political focal point. Instead, they designed a large municipal square in the northern part of the site, with the municipality building as the largest and most prominent structure. This design signalled the emergence of local government as a critical political actor in the social and political sphere. Ultimately, the plan was rejected by the High Council of Architecture and Urban Planning, and the political tensions between parties led to the mayor's conviction for corruption.⁴

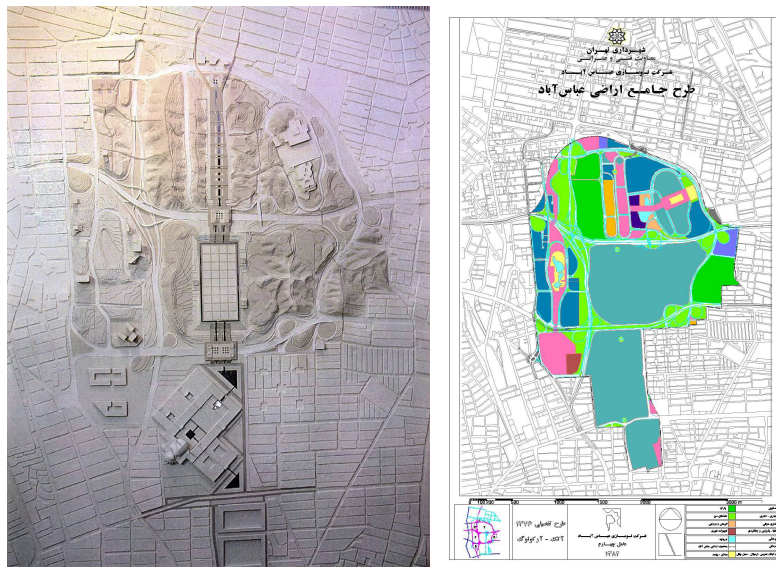


Figure. 4. The ATEC masterplan featuring the large municipal square, and the site zoning plan in 1997. Source: Abbas-Abad management company Tehran.

To sum up, the development of the Abbas-Abad site by the late 1990s and early 2000s was significantly influenced by conflicts and political struggles between two competing visions for the future of Tehran and Iran. The prolonged development process and multiple rejections of the master plan were symptomatic of a broader political conflict and power struggle for dominance in the capital, both in terms of land ownership and representation. Despite the Supreme leader's call to develop the site only as the ecological and cultural centre for the nation, in reality, the coordination between different organisations became an impossible task for the planners and Abbas-Abad Management Company. Between 1997 and 2003 multiple revisions of ATEC plan prepared to protect the site's unity but ultimately the Abbas-Abad Complex Management Company presented a map in 2003 showing the site divided into seven distinct sections. Each section varies in proportion and scale, with a focus on religious, cultural, recreational, and administrative activities. (see figure x).

In 2003, the Abbas Abad Management Company (AAMC) commissioned four prominent architecture and planning consultants in the country to collaborate on a strategic design.

⁴ Important to note that, this was not the only reason for the mayor's conviction. His overall support for President Khatami during the 1997 election and the use of various resources from the Tehran municipality for Khatami's campaign were also factors in the conviction.

They were tasked with considering the functions proposed for seven different sections and preparing a new plan that incorporates the current situation and the complex division of land among multiple organizations. The plan was expected to provide a more holistic understanding of the changes in the capital and the adjacent neighbourhoods to the site (ref. municipality report, 2006). To achieve this, the AAMC played an important role as a coordinator in the preparation and implementation of the masterplan. Their role was to ensure the design aligned with Tehran's development strategy, addressing the shortage of green open spaces, cultural and tourism facilities to attract both national and international visitors.



Figure 5. The municipality's proposal for the division of the site into seven sections with different activities. Source: Naghshe Jahan Pars consultant report, 2006.

3.4. 2003-2016: Promoting Tolerance: Building a centre for cultural diplomacy in the capital

In 2003 the reformists lost city council elections to Islamists conservative party and conservative candidates from the Alliance of Builders of Islamic Iran were elected to Tehran City Council. Ahmadinejad, a close associate of hard-liners within military and intelligence circles, seized his opportunity when widespread disillusionment with the reformist government allowed conservatives to gain control of the Tehran City Council. Subsequently, the fifteen-member Council appointed Ahmadinejad as mayor of Tehran. Upon assuming office, he began to reverse the policies of his predecessors (reformist mayor Karbaschi) — transforming Tehran's socio-cultural landscape, cultivating neighborhood clienteles, and facilitating the access of his military and intelligence allies to the city's extensive resources (Bayat, 2009). Ahmadinejad brought back again the anti-Western ideology of post-revolutionary years and in the two years of his mayorship all large-scale projects were on

hold and instead he gave more attention to provision of basic services and promoted the idea of relocating the capital (ISNA, xxx).

Revolutionary posters, placards, and murals reappeared in public spaces, while approximately 400 traditional-style drinking fountains (*saqqa-khaneh*) were constructed throughout Tehran, each adorned with images of neighborhood Iran-Iraq war victims. Ahmadinejad pledged to honour the memories of Basiji and Pasdaran martyrs during the war by reburying their remains at numerous strategic locations across the city. Tehran's renowned cultural complexes were either converted into *tekyes*, venues for religious activities, or deprived of funding (Bayat, 2010). Anti-vice vigilantes intensified their surveillance of non-conformist women and youth in the capital's streets (Khatam, 2015). As a result, until 2005, the Abbas-Abad project remained on paper, and only the Grand Mosque project and its surroundings continued to be developed. To the north of the Musalla, a substantial area has been redeveloped to accommodate newly established organizations under the patronage of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. These include the Sadra Islamic Philosophy Research Institute, the Supreme Council of the Quran, Hosseinieh al-Zahra, and the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (report from Abbas-Abad management company). Most of these organisations established with the aspiration of spreading Shia Islam revolutionary ideologies and promote "Iranian-Islamic culture and civilization to the world"⁵.

Ahmadinejad won the presidential election in 2005, just two years after his mayoral term. His victory marked the first time a Tehran mayor risen to the presidency, highlighting a new era for the political influence of the Tehran municipality and city council.⁶ In other words, the Iranian capital in the 21st century increasingly became a focal point for political and social change, being both influenced by and shaping these transformations. The development of Abbas-Abad in the first decade of the 21st century serves as a microcosm of the political tensions and aspirations among various social and political groups in Iran, including religious hardliners (conservatives), moderate conservatives, reformists, and secular groups. The new master plan for the site, designed by renowned architectural firms in Tehran, led by Naghsh-e Jahan Pars, was ultimately approved by the High Council of Architecture and Urban Planning. This approval was a direct result of Ayatollah Khamenei's (Supreme Leader) official directive to develop the Abbas-Abad hills as the nation's cultural center and to fully implement its comprehensive plan (interview with planners at Naghsh-e Jahan Pars).

The approval of the Abbas-Abad master plan in 2006 coincided with a significant defeat for the religious hardliners and Ahmadinejad's supporters in Tehran's municipal election, as they nearly lost all their seats in the previously dominated council. Reformists and moderate conservatives, who were critical of Ahmadinejad's policies, won the majority of seats in Tehran's municipal elections. This outcome was widely interpreted as a manifestation of public dissatisfaction with Ahmadinejad's positions, which had exacerbated conflicts with Western nations and brought Iran closer to U.N. sanctions and economic embargoes. The decisive victory of moderate conservatives and reformists in the municipal election resulted

⁵ Quoted from the website of [Islamic Culture and Relation Organisation](#) – accessed February 2025

⁶ For more details on Ahmadinejad rise to presidency see the book Ahmadinejad: The Secret History of Iran's Radical Leader, by Kasra Naji, Bloomsbury publishing, 2007.

in substantial support for Mohammad Qalibaf, a former national police chief and Ahmadinejad's opponent in the presidential election, to become mayor of Tehran. Qalibaf was not only openly critical of Ahmadinejad's policies, but he also presented himself with a relatively modern and stylish demeanour, in stark contrast to Ahmadinejad's modest Islamist representation. He emerged an impediment to Ahmadinejad's efforts to retain control, along with his allies, over the capital's resources. Positioning himself as a religious moderate and a robust, modernizing manager, Qalibaf pursued several of Karbaschi's unfinished initiatives, including revitalizing cultural complexes, constructing highways, completing the Tehran metro system, and implementing the Abbas-Abad master plan, most of which had been initiated before the revolution during the Pahlavi era. However, the persistent encroachments by the government and the Revolutionary Guard into the municipality's prerogatives undermined the city's governing authorities. This trend intensified following the Green Movement in 2009 (Bayat, 2010).

In the years between 2006 and 2016 Qalibaf fully implemented the Abbas-Abad plan and used the project as one of his successful achievements. The new plan for Abbas-Abad Hill amalgamated elements from previously proposed plans with existing landownership patterns, traffic and transportation systems, and incorporated the visions of major stakeholders (Figure. X). However, despite acknowledging the fragmented development of the site by various actors in the 2005 master plan, the plan proposed the creation of a unified cultural hub for the capital and the nation. This hub was intended to simultaneously accommodate Islamic revolutionary organizations and new institutions promoting tolerance and socio-cultural diversity. The potential juxtaposition of these two functions—Islamism and tolerance—in various parts and parcels of the Abbas-Abad site provided an opportunity for competing political groups, particularly the dominant conservatives and reformists, to symbolically restore their legitimacy on both local and international scales.



As the southern part of the site became the locus of Grand Mosque and associated Islamic institutions, the northern sections were designated for diverse cultural and recreational activities. For example, in the northeast areas covering a total area of 100 hectares—include the National Library of Iran (97,000 sqm), the Academies of the Islamic Republic of Iran (68,000 sqm), the Islamic Revolution and Holy Defence Museum (42,000 sqm), Tehran Book Garden (65,000 sqm), and the Garden-Museum of the Central Bank of Iran (106,000 sqm). Moreover, the north-west side of the site was designed as open ecological and culture area spanning 47,000 sqm piece of land including Abraham Garden, the Islamic civilisation Garden, the House of Poetry, the House of Music, the House of Architecture, the Artists' Club, Art Workshops, the Central Mansion (Kooshk-e Markazi).



However, the construction of Abbas-Abad project and the promise of cultural diplomacy and tolerance coincided with the 2009 election contest between Ahmadinejad and Mir Hussein Mousavi which significantly altered Tehran's social and political landscape. Reform enthusiasts from various social classes, who had abstained from voting in 2005 election, seized the opportunity to express their discontent with Ahmadinejad government through open mobilization. Women and young people led grassroots activism, organizing vibrant street marches. Central Tehran, especially north of *Enghelab* (Revolution) Street, became the hub of this lively campaign. However, Ahmadinejad's victory, marred by allegations of fraud, crushed many hopes and sparked widespread moral outrage, fueling an unprecedented protest movement in the Islamic Republic's history.

Asef Bayat described the Green Movement “a post-Islamist drive to reclaim citizenship within a broadly religious-ethical order, articulated a long-standing popular desire for a dignified life free from everyday surveillance, corruption and arbitrary rule” (2010:118).

Following the election results, street politics became the movement's main expression until state violence suppressed it. Police and basij militias clashed with protestors, while nightly rooftop chants of 'Allah Akbar' and 'death to the dictator' echoed across Tehran. The demonstrations primarily took place in central and northern Tehran, with the educated middle classes playing a key role (Peyke Iran newspaper, 9 November 2010) ⁷. Although the marginal poor stayed away, youth from southern districts also participated in the protests.

The major uprising and mass protests in Tehran in 2009 prompted a radical transformation in the city's governance. The moderate image of Tehran under Qalibaf was completely altered as the municipality allied with the Revolutionary Guards, who took control of the city by deploying tens of thousands of securities and paramilitary agents. Within weeks, 4,000 protestors were arrested, at least 70 were killed, reformist media was shut down, and communication within the city was suspended (Khatam, 2010). By the end of the year, the number of detainees had reached 10,000⁸. State media launched a propaganda campaign, and opposition figures faced mass trials and house arrest. Surveillance intensified with hidden cameras and basij militias monitoring the activities of Tehranis, particularly in public spaces and gathering places (Khatam, 2010; Bayat, 2010). Public parks were ordered to set up prayer halls and broadcast the call to prayer (Shahrokni, 2020).

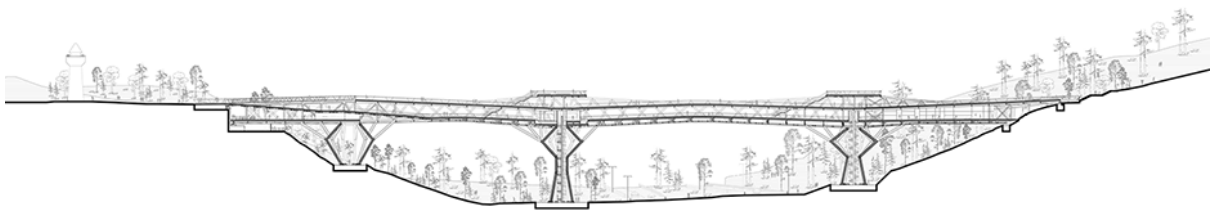
In the subsequent years, the conservative government became acutely aware of the weakening attachment to revolutionary and religious ideals and values among young people, as well as their dissatisfaction with stringent surveillance and the limited availability of public spaces and leisure activities in the city. Furthermore, the global commercialization of Western leisure products, coupled with the widespread adoption of smartphones and social media in 2012 and 2013, placed the Iranian government at a disadvantage in the "cultural war," challenging the Islamic Republic's efforts to maintain its Islamic identity (Shahrokni, 2020). Hence these social changes led some officials at the municipality to push for expanding public spaces and rebuilt the state-society relations. Government reports identified unemployment, the "marriage crisis," and a lack of cultural, sports, and entertainment facilities as factors contributing to "morally corrupt networks." Recognizing the limits of prohibition, Tehran local authority officials advocated for creating alternative cultural spaces and public spheres for all specially for youth.

In this context, the Abbas-Abad site once again offered the Iranian state an opportunity to reshape its image both locally and globally. By presenting itself as a provider and protector of citizens' rights to public space, rather than a violator of citizen's rights. As a result, the municipality and Abbas-Abad management company commissioned a high-tech mega public space project, a grandiose pedestrian bridge spanning *Modarres* highway. This bridge connects two public parks, *Abo Atash* and *Taleghani*, located in the northwest of the Abbas-Abad site. The 7,700 sqm footbridge, measuring 270 metres in length and 6 to 13 metres in width, emerged from previous plans on paper. Unprecedented in the history of construction at the Abbas-Abad site or in Tehran, this large-scale high-tech project was designed by a 26-year-old architect and completed in just two years, despite economic sanctions and embargoes. The bridge has become an icon of cultural and technological progress both in

⁷ Date of newspaper on Iranian calendar: 18 Aban 1388

⁸ Shahrzad News, 4 October 2010

Iran and internationally, showcasing the capability of a young female architect to design a complex structure and “a place for people to stay and ponder, not simply pass.” The Tabiat Bridge (Nature Bridge) received significant attentions globally and the architect received the first prize by Aga-Khan Foundation and was covered by major international media agencies such as guardian newspaper. At the national and city scale the bridged was welcomed by various social groups and became the place to go and visit in Tehran. Ultimately, the state's initiative to introduce alternative public spaces in the capital was successful, and the pedestrian bridge became an ideal instrument for projecting a positive and tolerant image of the Islamic state to both Iranians and the international community.



4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I focus on the Abbas-Abad mega-project in Tehran as a case study and show how the political elite deployed various spatial and political strategies to maintain state authoritarian domination and shape state-society power relations. I argue that the urban megaprojects in capital cities are key sites within which struggles over the legitimacy and survival of the regimes are evident and traceable. This is critical for the study of

megaprojects in the Global South, as the majority of existing studies mainly associate the minimal commitment to socially just policies in planning megaprojects, primarily due to a focus on profitability and competitiveness. However, in the case of Tehran, the project is not necessarily concerned with profitability and economic development. Instead, it aims to propose new beautification schemes, grandiose green spaces, and cultural activities to control state-society power relations and maintain the authoritarian power of the state at the local and global level.

This study showed how development of large-scale urban land in the heart of Tehran became the stage for representation of state ideology and political power in the past decades.

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