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Revolutionary charitable foundations and politics of land acquisition and land conflict in peri-urban areas of Tehran

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This paper examines the role of Islamic revolutionary charitable foundations in shaping land governance and conflict in the peri-urban areas of Tehran, focusing on the contested settlement of Ozun Tapeh. Drawing on fieldwork and secondary sources, including planning documents, official newspapers and municipal reports, the study explores how these foundations operate at the intersection of formal state institutions, informal land claims, and religious—political networks. It highlights how they leverage Sharia-based legal interpretations, political influence, and spatial strategies to assert control over land and influence urban development. Through the case of Ozun Tapeh, the paper demonstrates that land conflicts in Iran are not solely the result of state failure but are shaped by strategic negotiations and deal-making among municipalities, foundations, private developers, local religious authorities

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and communities. These interactions dissolve conventional boundaries between public/private and formal/informal, while contesting notions of legality and justice in urban governance. By centring religious-political actors in land political and moral economy, this research challenges their conventional framing as welfare providers or extralegal entities, instead positioning them as central to hybrid governance systems. The findings call for rethinking religious institutions' role in Middle Eastern urbanism, particularly their dual engagement with neoliberal development and Islamic redistributive rhetoric.

Introduction

Religious institutions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have historically played a significant role in land governance and welfare provision, particularly through mechanisms such as waqf (Islamic charitable endowments). However, the emergence of modern nation-states and rapid urbanisation in the 20th century introduced new regulatory frameworks that curtailed their administrative authority over waqf and land management by integrating these systems into state bureaucratic structures (Ghazaleh 2011; Moumtaz 2021). Despite this decline, in recent decades, religious institutions, such as faith-based charities and NGOs, and religious political groups, have adapted to neoliberal reforms and governance, strategically reasserting their role in land governance and welfare provision (Harb 2008; Atia 2012, 2013; Lanz and Oosterbaan 2016). They therefore continue to shape land politics and governance, as well as the socio-spatial configuration of fast-changing urban and peri-urban areas. For instance, Bou Akar (2018) demonstrates how religious-political organisations such as Hezbollah in Beirut's southern periphery have harnessed urban development activities over the past two decades to acquire economic, political, and territorial power. Despite these critical studies, the role of religious groups and organisations in influencing land politics and community development remains at the margins of Middle East and North Africa urban scholarship (Sait and Lim 2008; Moumtaz 2021).

This paper examines the role of Islamic revolutionary charitable foundations (in Farsi: Bonyād-hā) in shaping land governance and conflicts over land ownership in contested areas of Tehran's periphery. Through an analysis of their distinctive ideological and institutional frameworks, the study examines how these foundations operate between formal governance structures and informal land claims, asserting their influence through three key mechanisms: (1) interpretations of Sharia law pertaining to land acquisition and ownership rights, (2) political leverage within judiciary and state apparatuses, and (3) spatial tactics and interventions. By foregrounding these dynamics, we employ the political and moral economy lens introduced in this special feature as an analytical lens to show how the Islamic revolutionary charitable foundations (Bonyād-ha) in Iran engage in hybrid forms of governance, operating at the intersection of public institutions, private markets, military organisations

and religious-political networks directly linked to the supreme leader (Saeidi 2004; Bayat 2007; Manouchehrifar 2015; Taheri Tafti 2024). We approach hybrid governance through the lens of divided sovereignty, in which political and economic authority is fragmented and negotiated among state and non-state actors (Shambayati 2004). This is particularly relevant in Iran, where the polarised political structure, in which authoritarian and democratic practices are combined and sovereignty is divided between elected and unelected officials, has directly influenced urban governance practices and the allocation of resources, such as land and basic services (Ibid). In doing so, we draw on the scholarship that unpacks formal and informal practices of state and non-state actors engaging in land governance (Lomard 2016, Bénit-Gbaffou 2018; Taheri Tafti 2024)—highlighting political, moral and ideological pursuits of actors involved in land acquisition and speculation next to their economic interest (Shatkin 2016; Yeşilbağ 2022).

Revolutionary charitable foundations were established in Iran following the 1979 Revolution under the directive of Ayatollah Khomeini.[1] Framed as institutions outside the formal state and rooted in the will of the people, the foundations pursued two main goals: providing services to the marginalised (*mostaz'afin*) and reestablishing the bond between the Imam (Supreme Leader) and the Ummah[2] (community of believers) (Maloney 2004; Asadollahnejad 2024). These foundations aimed to restore the Shia clergy's political and economic authority, acting as a vital link between the ruling elite and disenfranchised groups. Drawing on Islamic concepts like *Anfal*[3] (public wealth) and *Amval-e Namashru* (illegitimate property), they confiscated assets from the former elite, private banks, and industries (Bayat 2010; Maloney 2015). According to post-revolutionary interpretations of Sharia (Vahabi 2024), such resources fell under the Supreme Leader's exclusive and discretionary control for the benefit of the poor and marginalised. Empowered by this authority, the foundations benefit from tax exemptions and operate without regulatory or public oversight. This arrangement has contributed to a dual structure of governance, characterised by the coexistence of governmental organisations and parallel networks of economic and political power.

It is essential to note that a significant portion of these foundations' developmental activities was concentrated in rural and peri-urban areas, particularly during the first two decades following the revolution. The extensive interventions of key foundations—including agricultural development (Construction Jihad Foundation), housing provision (Housing Foundation), and land/infrastructure management (Foundation of the Oppressed)—significantly transformed rural-urban linkages nationwide (Lob 2018). This study focuses specifically on Tehran's peri-urban areas, where revolutionary foundations have maintained a sustained and active presence since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. However, this focus should not be interpreted as implying that these foundations lack influence in urban centres. On the contrary, they remain pivotal actors in Tehran's housing and land markets, with the Foundation of the Oppressed notably serving as one of the capital's major landowners (Taheri Tafti 2024).

Scholarship on Iran's Revolutionary charitable foundations highlights their increased influence across various sectors, primarily through extensive entrepreneurial activities and close affiliations with political power (Maloney

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2000, 2004, 2015; Raisdana 2003; Saeidi 2004). These foundations are often characterised as parastatal entities that disproportionately benefited from the economic liberalisation and privatisation policies of the 1990s. The large-scale transfer of public enterprises and assets to these organisations under privatisation policies was frequently justified through populist rhetoric, presenting them as advocates for the poor, the disabled, and veterans of the Iran-Iraq War (Maloney 2004; Valadbaygi 2021). A special issue of *Goftogu* magazine[4] underscored the foundations' lack of accountability and detailed their sectoral dominance in healthcare, construction, and agriculture (2003, in Persian). The authors in this issue argued that the expansion of Foundations' influence has weakened the private sector and that the dual power structure between the state and Foundations-military networks poses a significant obstacle to Iran's socio-economic development (Athari 2003; Farzin 2003; Hourcade 2003; Raisdana 2003). Valadbaygi (2021, 7) further notes that many ostensibly private firms operate as subsidiaries of Foundations or military bodies, with these entities collectively controlling an estimated 60% of Iran's economy by 2019 (Valadbaygi 2022).

Despite their substantial presence, particularly in construction and real estate, the political and spatial roles of foundations in urban development and planning have remained underexplored in Iranian urban scholarship. This gap is partly due to limited data access and the opaque, politically sensitive nature of these foundations. However, recent studies have begun to address this void, examining the role of foundations in Tehran's urban politics and their interference in local governance (Khatam 2015; Khatam and Keshavarzian 2016), the political economy of high-rise development (Mashayekhi 2019), and the influence of state-foundation relations on land value extraction (Taheri Tafti 2024). Building on this emerging body of work, this article examines the case of 'Ozun Tapeh', located in Tehran's eastern periphery, to explore how land-related practices by the Foundation of the Oppressed, such as land confiscation and development, have shaped land governance and produced new forms of socio-spatial exclusion and land conflict. We challenge the dominant narrative, prevalent among Iranian planning professionals and in media discourses, that portrays the Foundation's actions primarily as the result of state weakness or authoritarianism and as operating outside the legal and formal regulatory framework (Ghamami 2008; Farivar Sadri 2014). We argue that explanations focused solely on illegality, corruption, state inaction, or planning failure are insufficient, as they portray these practices as exceptional, extra-legal, and disconnected from the planning and regulatory apparatus. Instead, we demonstrate that the Foundation's land development activities are deeply embedded in both planning and regulatory frameworks, as well as in Islamic conceptions of land tenure and property rights—frameworks that were initially intended to protect the public interest and curb land speculation yet perpetuated land commodification.

To advance this argument, the paper is structured as follows. First, it reviews the literature on three key areas: hybrid and fragmented governance in urban peripheries, the role of religious actors in land appropriation and conflict in the Global South, and religious-political organisations and city-making practices in the Middle East. This is followed by a methods section. Next, the paper sets the scene by providing the historical background on the formation of Islamic

Revolutionary Charitable Foundations and their relationship with the state and other actors, including the military, the private sector, and civil society. The fourth section presents our empirical case study of Ozun Tapeh, analysing contestation, negotiation and deal-making over land claims and ownership between the Foundation of the Oppressed and various actors across different scales. We examine how the Foundation's land practices are shaped and reshaped by intersecting political, religious, economic, and moral forces. The final section reflects on the mechanisms through which the Foundation of the Oppressed has intervened in land governance and distribution in Ozun Tapeh, thereby generating new forms of social and spatial exclusion. The findings also highlight how these practices have influenced and harmed perceptions of justice and the public good, not only within local communities but also among experts and decision-makers involved in land governance and planning institutions.

Fragmented governance, peri-urban land appropriation and religious actors

We situate the discourse of peri-urban land confiscation and development by the Foundation of the Oppressed within three strands of literature: (1) hybrid governance in urban peripheries; (2) land appropriation and conflict by religious actors in the Global South; and (3) Religious-political organisations and city-making practices in the Middle East.

The critical literature on peripheral urbanisation challenges traditional conceptions of urban peripheries as unplanned, informal, and illegal spaces that evolve outside governmental regulatory frameworks (Roy 2005; McFarlane and Waibel 2012; McFarlane and Waibel 2012; Caldeira 2017; Caldeira 2017; Lambert 2020). These studies demonstrate how states actively produce irregularity and illegality within urban peripheries. Through planning laws and interventions that redefine the status of land and buildings, the state can render what was once irregular as regular, and vice versa (Kuyucu 2014; Bhan 2016). These flexible and negotiated state practices within planning and urban governance systems are often driven by market logics and neoliberal regimes (Ozkan and Turk 2016). Roy (2005) reveals how states strategically employ selective enforcement, allowing informal settlements to persist until land values justify clearance. This creates 'grey spaces'—zones of legal ambiguity where residents and developers navigate regulatory gaps (Follmann 2022). Similarly, Caldeira (2017) demonstrates how the peripheries of the Global South are actively constructed through speculative land markets, ambiguous governance structures, and unequal infrastructure investments. The periphery thus emerges as a politico-spatial battleground where hybrid governance regimes, speculative logics, and contested claims intersect (Manara and Pani 2023b).

Recent studies have moved beyond neoliberalism as a singular explanatory framework, instead highlighting the complexity of political relationships that shape peripheral urbanisation as a differentiated, context-specific process (Caldeira 2017; Lambert 2020; Le Galès and Robinson 2023). This perspective recognises the inherent instability of legal and regulatory systems, as well as the

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improvisation, experimentation, and contestation that characterise interactions among diverse actors—from residents to state officials (Caldeira 2017; Sundaresan 2019). In our analysis of land governance in Tehran's peripheral areas, we build on this scholarship by emphasising the need for a more nuanced understanding of the contextual and territorialised politics that underpin urban peripheries and their evolving land dynamics.

Another strand of scholarship highlighted the pivotal role of religious and religious-inspired actors in land appropriation and governance in the peri-urban areas of cities in the Global South (Karaman 2013; Lanz and Oosterbaan 2016; Bou Akar 2018; Lawanson 2021). This body of work offers a critical analytical lens through which to explore the interplay between religious actors, formal governance structures, market forces, and informal land claims in urban peripheries. These studies emphasise that religious actors—such as influential faith groups, faith-based charities, and organisations—operate as powerful urban agents whose impact extends far beyond social welfare provision (Harb 2008; Deeb and Harb 2009; Millington, Garbin, and Coleman 2024; Millington, Garbin, and Coleman 2024). Rather than merely compensating for state incapacities, these actors often compete with, overlap, and interact with formal governance structures, contributing to hybrid forms of governance, the commodification of land, and the reinforcement of exclusionary practices (Bayat 2007; Harb and Fawaz 2010; Lawanson 2021; Oosterbaan 2022). The developmental activities of these actors span a spectrum of formality and informality, ranging from exploiting zoning loopholes and planning regulations (Bou Akar 2018; Fawaz 2009; Lawanson 2021) to discretionary interpretations of building codes or complete circumvention of state oversight. Building on this scholarship, in this paper, we call for a closer analysis of how religious actors intervene in land development and governance in urban peripheries through complex interactions with multiple state and non-state actors and the instrumental use of religious beliefs and norms related to the public interest and the common good.

The role of religious-political actors in urban development processes and city-making practices in the MENA region has often been framed in binary terms—either as providers of social welfare, filling gaps left by retreating states, or as anti-systemic forces resisting neoliberal capitalism. However, emerging scholarship complicates this dichotomy by demonstrating how groups like Shiite Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) actively engage with market-driven urban development while leveraging religious and sectarian identities to consolidate territorial control (Fawaz 2009; Atia 2012; Karaman 2013; Çavdar 2016). These studies critique the tendency to reduce religious actors to mere welfare providers (Harb 2008; Atia 2012; Bou Akar 2018). While these groups do deliver essential services—particularly in marginalised urban peripheries—their operations are deeply embedded in neoliberal economic systems. For example, Hezbollah's post-2006 reconstruction of Beirut's southern suburbs exemplifies what Harb (2008) terms 'resistance urbanism', where rapid rebuilding served both political consolidation and real estate speculation (Fawaz 2009; Bou Akar 2018). Similarly, Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) represents a model of institutionalised religious urbanism, merging neoliberal development

policies with religious welfare networks. This created a system of municipal patronage that linked housing access to political allegiance (Batuman 2017). The resulting welfare-oriented gentrification displaced marginalised communities while offering religiously framed compensation, illustrating how religious organisations can simultaneously embrace market logic and moral governance (Karaman 2013).

In Egypt, Atia's (2012) concept of 'pious neoliberalism' captures how faith-based organisations like the Muslim Brotherhood operated within state-tolerated boundaries during Mubarak's regime, before the Arab Spring. These groups upgraded informal settlements to build grassroots support while avoiding confrontation with Mubarak-era neoliberalism. Iran presents yet another trajectory, where revolutionary foundations evolved from redistributive mechanisms into powerful urban developers (Saeidi 2004; Khatam 2015). Leveraging confiscated land and religious legitimacy, these foundations became one of the main driving forces behind Tehran's construction boom, embodying the paradox of Islamic revolutionary ideals coexisting with speculative urbanism (Khatam 2015; Taheri Tafti 2024). These cases reveal a paradox: Islamic charities and organisations simultaneously critique and exploit market systems. Ethnographic work (e.g. Deeb and Harb 2013; Bou Akar 2018) highlights how organisations like *Hezbollah* contribute to hybrid governance systems by blending welfare provision, sectarian identity politics, and profit-oriented urbanism, ultimately reconfiguring urban citizenship through spatially articulated sectarian control. Such findings challenge rigid categorisations of these actors within urban studies, which treat them as operating either 'inside' or 'outside' state and market structures (Bou Akar 2018).

Engaging with this critical scholarship, this paper deliberately avoids framing the land-related activities of the Foundation of the Oppressed in Tehran's peripheries as either inside or outside the state or the market. Instead, we examine how the Foundation navigates these structures, weaving between formal and informal processes, shaping territories and constructing political and spatial forms of otherness. By blending Islamic-egalitarian ideologies with market-oriented speculation, these religious—political organisations expose the limitations of binary framings in urban studies that categorise such actors as either public or private, legal or illegal. The above examples of diverse activities of these religious-political organisations across the MENA region demonstrate their integration into hybrid governance arrangements that intertwine welfare provision, territorial control, and profit logics. It is therefore critical to interrogate the contextual specificities of these actors' interventions in city-making practices, moving beyond neoliberal singularism toward more nuanced analyses of socio-political and economic power dynamics and their implications for urban space and territorial transformation.

Research methodology

To examine the Foundation of the Oppressed's role in land confiscation and development, as well as its dealings with the various actors involved in land disputes, we undertook a qualitative case study drawing on both primary and

secondary sources. The study centres on Ozun Tapeh, an informal settlement on the urban fringe of Boumehen, situated about 60 kilometres east of Tehran.

Two key considerations guided the selection of Ozun Tapeh. First, its geographic and demographic context is significant as the settlement lies within the administrative boundaries of Boumehen town and in close proximity to Pardis New Town—a government-led regional development initiative aimed at decentralising Tehran and providing mass affordable housing (Maskan Mehr) for low-income and impoverished populations. This proximity creates a compelling dynamic between formal governance strategies for the provision of land and housing, and the informal land claims asserted by marginalised communities in response. Second, the land dispute between Ozun Tapeh's residents (squatters) and the Foundation, as the legal landowner, garnered significant attention in mainstream media. The Foundation's efforts to relocate residents sparked public controversy, prompting investigative reporting by journalists and advocacy by urban activists. These developments raised critical questions about the Foundation's distributive justice claims and moral and religious commitments to the poor and the public good. This is particularly noteworthy, given the Foundation's opaque and politically sensitive nature, which often suppresses public debate on contentious social justice issues and restricts academic research by limiting access to official data. Thus, these resources became valuable secondary data for our research, enabling us to identify the key actors involved in the Ozun Tapeh land conflict and to better understand their roles and relationships in managing land disputes.

The research initially examined the historical emergence of revolutionary charitable foundations within the context of contemporary land conflicts. To document Ozun Tapeh's historical development and land struggles, as well as its role in broader peri-urban land disputes, we analysed data from the Statistical Centre of Iran (including population and housing censuses from 1976, 1996, 2006, and 2011). We also conducted a systematic review of planning documents, including the Tehran Metropolitan Plan (2005) and the Comprehensive Plan for the *Rudehen-Pardis-Abali* area (2009). Through this approach, we meticulously reconstructed the processes of peri-urban transformation, infrastructure development, and zoning changes in Ozun Tapeh.

Site visits and semi-structured interviews were used to build a detailed picture of land-related disputes and to identify the principal actors. Fifteen interviews were conducted with residents occupying the land and with local authorities, revealing the intricate relations shaping the settlement's evolution. Additionally, the analysis draws on an unpublished report titled The Land Question and Informal Settlements, commissioned in 2016 by the Organisation for Urban Development and Revitalisation.[5] More recent data are drawn entirely from secondary sources (e.g. media reports, municipal announcements and publications, and planning documents).

Ultimately, it is essential to acknowledge that this study faced significant limitations in accessing key institutional actors, particularly representatives of the Foundation of the Oppressed and municipal authorities. The politically sensitive nature of land conflicts involving religious and political organisations in Iran restricted the scope of data collection, necessitating reliance on alternative sources (e.g. resident accounts, reports by local and national news

agencies and journalists) to triangulate the findings. Despite these challenges, the research provides critical insights into the contested land governance of Tehran's periphery.

Revolutionary foundations and politics of land redistribution

Before the 1963 Land Reform, Iran had limited legal frameworks governing urban land ownership. Article 35 of the 1928 Civil Law permitted individuals to claim and revive vacant land, serving as the primary legislative basis for land rights for several decades. In the 1950s, new urban land policies began to formalise land governance in Tehran. The 1963 Land Reform aimed to modernise agriculture, dismantle feudal and clerical control over land, and redistribute land to smallholders. It also sought to centralise land administration within the state and integrate rural areas into the national economy. While intended to promote development and reduce poverty, the reform triggered significant socio-economic shifts, including the displacement of farmers and increased rural-to-urban migration, which contributed to underdevelopment in rural regions (Hooglund 1982; Harris and Kalb 2019). However, due to the influence of powerful landlords occupying key government positions, the reform was only partially implemented and had limited success in dismantling large-scale private land ownership, alleviating poverty, or addressing urban-rural disparities. By 1978, approximately 90 per cent of the land in the outskirts of Tehran was owned by just 10 per cent of the landowners (Keivani, Mattingly, and Majedi 2008).

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, social justice and redistribution emerged as the central themes for the political elite within the Islamic Republic, regardless of their political or religious affiliations (Kadivar 2022). The new constitution was replete with references to justice and equity as the two main principles of governance. Shia religious leaders sought to transform urban land ownership patterns in line with Islamic principles on wealth and ownership. According to Islamic values, the ultimate ownership of land is with God, people are simply guardians of public trust, and ownership should be limited for the welfare of the public—hence land is not recognised as the particular property of anyone and 'only people's work on the land implies private ownership rights' (Majedi 1996; Sait and Lim 2008).

Islamic law provided the newly formed Islamic Republic with both a legal and moral justification for expropriating vacant and abandoned land without compensation. Motivated by this framework, many poor and squatter dwellers seized the opportunity to occupy vacant plots of land and unfinished buildings, adapting these spaces to their needs (Bayat 1997). These occupations often faced minimal opposition from the new government and were supported by revolutionary courts, militias, leftist groups, and religious authorities (Tavasoli 2020). Local actors rapidly developed the occupied areas, acquiring the Islamic legal status of *dayer* (developed land), while maintaining an ambiguous ownership status. In this context, the newly established charitable revolutionary organisation by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, notably the Housing Foundation[6] and the Foundation of the Oppressed confiscated the

land and property of royal and aristocratic families across the country, actively participating in the transfer of public 'confiscated' land into private hands. Drawing on Islamic concepts like Anfal (public wealth) and Amval-e Namashru (illegitimate property), these foundations confiscated assets from the former elite, private banks, and industries (Bayat 1997; Maloney 2015).

Alongside religious justifications for redistribution, the government passed the 1982 Urban Land Law to nationalise and transfer unused urban land—including city-adjacent wastelands—to the Ministry of Housing and Municipalities for housing development. The law abolished private ownership of unused land, allowing landowners without homes to retain only 1,000–15,000 square metres (Azizi 1998). This restricted private ownership to 1,000 square metres in peri-urban areas, significantly reshaping their social and spatial structure. These measures improved land access for landless and low-income households and addressed barriers posed by private ownership to public development. They also led to improvements in housing indicators such as tenure and household-to-unit ratios during the revolution's first decade (Rafiei 1989; Majedi 1996).

Despite some progress, these policies led to significant urban and administrative challenges. Weak post-revolutionary institutions, ad hoc interventions by charitable foundations, and unclear land classifications hindered the practical implementation. The state's limited capacity to manage land acquisition and allocation, combined with unregulated occupations and arbitrary redistribution, fuelled Tehran's peripheral urbanisation and the emergence of hundreds of townships beyond city limits (Sheikhi 2001).

The haphazard implementation of land policies, combined with housing and construction being perceived as the most viable sectors for investment, encouraged small developers and landowners on the urban fringe to speculate and commercialise land (Harris and Kalb 2019), thereby accelerating urban sprawl and peri-urban population growth. In fact, after the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1987), with industrial and service infrastructure weakened by wartime expenditures, an implicit policy consensus—summarised by the slogan 'construction as a driver of the national economy'—came to dominate both macroeconomic and urban development strategies. This prioritisation was driven by four key factors: (1) the sector's high employment potential with relatively low investment; (2) reliance on domestically produced materials, minimising the need for foreign currency amid International economic sanctions; (3) the capacity of the private sector to operate independently of state funding; and (4) widespread public belief in real estate as a secure and profitable investment (Athari 2008).

These dynamics led policymakers and the public to place construction at the heart of economic growth, resulting in the democratisation of land speculation during the 1990s. As Ehsani (2009) notes, this shift enabled ordinary property owners to profit from urban development, while the propertyless faced growing exclusion due to inflation and rising rents. The First Five-Year Development Plan (1990–1994) explicitly reflected this orientation, emphasising the role of housing and construction in post-war reconstruction and employment generation, and allocating the largest share of national investment to the sector.[7] The following section demonstrates how this policy orientation, combined with state-led

privatisation and neoliberal reforms, fundamentally altered the redistributive ethos of revolutionary foundations, transforming them from justice-oriented institutions into key players in speculative urban markets.

From redistributive justice to entrepreneurial land governance

Since the 1990s, structural adjustment and privatisation in Iran have enabled non-state actors—particularly charitable revolutionary foundations and military organisations—to acquire substantial public assets (Valadbaygi 2021). Although officially framed as efforts to support the private sector, these policies have in practice entrenched monopolistic control by politically connected entities, consolidating a form of state capitalism dominated by a 'state bourgeoisie' closely aligned with the political elite (Forozan 2015; Maloney 2015; Valadbaygi 2021). State reports indicate that these entities acquired around one-third of privatised enterprises, while only 13% went to the actual private sector (Taheri Tafti 2024). Government measures, such as a 1994 parliamentary bill, prioritised Iran—Iraq war veterans and militia members—represented by these foundations and military organisations—in share allocations (Saeidi 2004), and many of the remaining enterprises were absorbed by networks of front companies linked to the state or military (Taheri Tafti 2024). As a result, bonyads and military groups have come to control extensive tracts of prime land in both central and peripheral areas of Tehran, while the Foundation of the Oppressed and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have significantly expanded their dominance in the construction sector (Harris 2013; Valadbaygi 2021; Taheri Tafti 2024). Together, this hegemonic influence and wider decentralisation and privatisation policies have fuelled growing disputes over peri-urban land development and ownership, producing new patterns of land inequality, social exclusion, and community discontent.

This expansion, initially through post-revolutionary confiscations and later through privatisation, marked a shift from welfare-oriented goals to profit-driven ventures, particularly in land development. The transition reflects a broader ideological shift from revolutionary Islamist-socialist ideals to more liberal economic models, reshaping how urban land is valued and contested (Athari 2008; Ehsani 2013; Khatam 2015). The foundations also enjoy extensive privileges, including tax exemptions, preferential credit, customs benefits, and protection from market competition (Saeidi 2004), enabling near-monopolies in key sectors (Katzman 2006). Their economic dominance further translates into political power, allowing Shia clerics and technocrats to maintain patronage networks and public dependency. While constitutionally classified as part of the public sector, these organisations operate with financial autonomy and extrajudicial authority, blurring the line between public and private sectors.

Iran's hybrid governance structure has given rise to complex, multi-scalar interactions in urban land management, involving both national actors—including ministries, revolutionary foundations, the IRGC, the Endowments Organisation (Awqaf), and the Urban Land Organisation (ULO) (Azizi 1998; Keivani, Mattingly, and Majedi 2008)—and local entities such as municipalities and cooperatives. While national institutions, particularly ministries, dominate

the formulation of urban and land policies, municipalities serve as key implementing agents. They mediate between a diverse range of stakeholders, including powerful actors such as the foundations and the IRGC. This institutional configuration has evolved notably since the enactment of the 1993 Municipal Fiscal Self-Sufficiency Act, which ended municipalities' financial dependence on the central government. As a result, municipalities have been compelled to form alliances with private developers and influential institutions to finance urban services (Ehsani 1999, 2013; Khatam 2015). These governance dynamics have fundamentally reshaped urban planning practices, influencing zoning regulations, land-use planning, the appropriation of urban space, and land speculation.

Peri-urban land conflict in Tehran

Over the past two decades, Tehran and its periphery have witnessed sharp increases in land and housing prices, making inner-city areas increasingly unaffordable—even for the middle class. This housing crisis has unfolded alongside the convergence of decentralisation and privatisation agendas and opaque governance structures, which have funnelled capital into real estate and construction. These dynamics have generated substantial revenues for powerful landholding entities such as the Foundation of the Oppressed, the IRGC, Tehran Municipality, and surrounding local governments. Specifically, since 1996, the Foundation of the Oppressed has expanded its activities across multiple sectors, including construction, infrastructure development, tourism and hospitality, and energy. To advance development under the banner of the fair distribution and public good, the Foundation has established thirteen major holding companies. Of these, five operate exclusively in construction, focusing on commercial and residential development.

Notably, each of these holding companies functions as a mega-developer and real estate conglomerate, overseeing numerous specialised subsidiaries in high-rise construction, mega shopping malls, highways, railways, and bridges. According to their official records and websites, these five holdings collectively control 48 developer and contractor firms engaged in urban projects of varying scales nationwide. Notably, 22 of these subsidiaries have focused solely on Tehran, delivering projects as diverse as apartment towers, mass housing complexes, commercial and leisure centres, cultural and sports facilities, and critical infrastructure, including highways, metro lines, bridges, tunnels, and the Tehran International Airport.

In the absence of significant public investment in social housing, demand for affordable alternatives has shifted to peri-urban areas, prompting land occupations, informal settlements, and the rapid conversion of agricultural and vacant lands. Former villages and small towns have urbanised at an unprecedented pace—some, like Islamshahr, now exceed 300,000 residents (Figure 1). This peripheral expansion has given rise to numerous types of land disputes among competing actors, institutions, and communities operating across multiple scales, highlighting tensions between formal governance frameworks and informal land claims and practices.
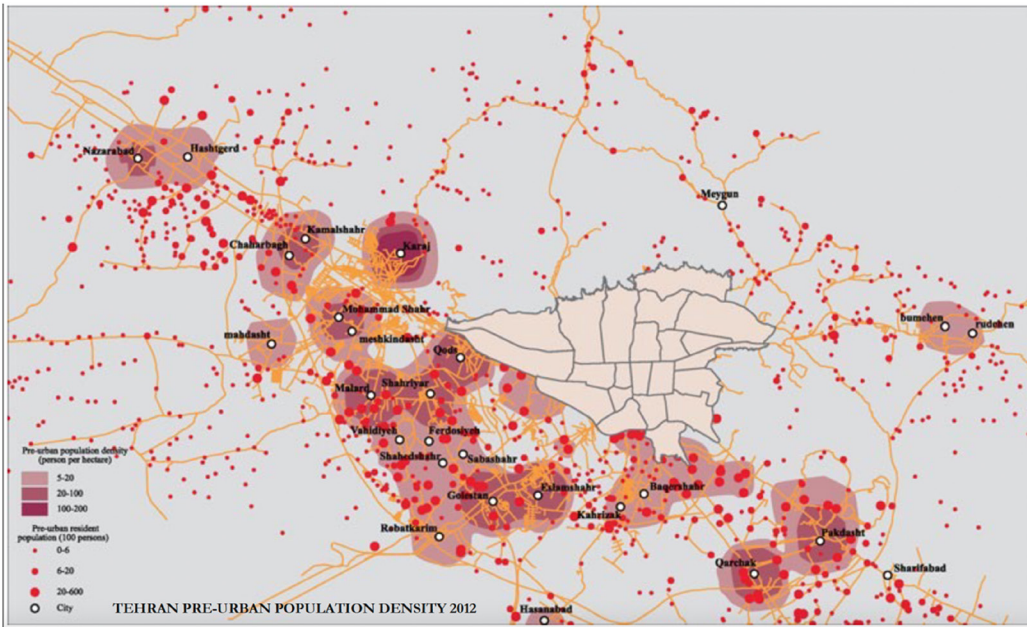
Figure 1: Rapid population growth of Tehran's peripheral areas. Source: Website of the municipality of Tehran.

The allocation of peripheral land is shaped by four primary mechanisms: the private property market, public sector housing initiatives for low-income groups, customary land tenure in fringe and village areas, and the dual redistributive and speculative activities of revolutionary charitable foundations (Sedighi Aghdas and Haj-Heidari 2023). Each mechanism reflects distinct and often overlapping approaches to land use and ownership. As rural land undergoes urban conversion, competing tenure systems frequently collide, generating conflicts among multiple stakeholders. These disputes typically manifest in two forms: (1) confrontations between low-income occupants and formal authorities or titleholders, and (2) overlapping informal claims to the same parcel. Paradoxically, the very institutions charged with conflict resolution—particularly municipalities and charitable foundations—often participate in land appropriation themselves, exacerbating governance challenges and intensifying socio-spatial tensions.

These dynamics have transformed Tehran's peripheries into contested spaces where governance frameworks are continually challenged and reconfigured by actors with competing interests. However, the existing literature on land governance and conflict in these areas remains limited, and often adopts a narrow focus on the porosity of legal frameworks, disputes between occupiers and state agencies (Majedi 1996), or the impacts of large-scale infrastructure projects on community dispossession and resistance (Ehsani 2013)—while largely overlooking the role of major landholding entities such as the foundations, whose assertive involvement in land development and conflict has been significant yet underexamined. Emerging studies from the Global South call for a more nuanced understanding of the diversity of actors and the evolving institutional relationships that shape land and property dynamics

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(Campbell, Tait, and Watkins 2014; Özogul and Tasan-Kok 2020). These works emphasise the inherently political nature of land disputes and the interplay between formal and informal processes in land acquisition and development (Hasan 2015; Lombard and Rakodi 2016; Van Leeuwen and Van Der Haar 2016; Manara and Pani 2023a). A multi-scalar approach is essential for identifying the actors involved, their alliances, and antagonisms, particularly in urban contexts, where power relations are complex and fluid. Building on this literature, our study focuses on identifying various actors involved in peri-urban land conflicts in Tehran. We argue that these disputes go beyond simple oppositions between poor occupiers and state institutions, revealing a web of interactions among multiple stakeholders. In the following section, we examine the case of land occupation and ownership conflict in Ozun Tapeh, a district of Boumehen city, identifying the key actors and unpacking the evolving contestations over land development and ownership.

Land appropriation and conflict in Ozun Tapeh

Ozun Tapeh is a neighbourhood within Boumehen City, located approximately 60 kilometres east of Tehran (Figure 1). Boumehen occupies a peripheral position relative to both the capital and the nearby planned satellite cities of Pardis and Rudehen, which have been developed as modern university towns featuring the Pardis Technology Park and multiple phases of the *'Maskan-e Mehr'* mass housing programme. Despite this regional development, Boumehen has been systematically excluded from official development plans and has not been assigned a distinct functional role in master planning documents. With limited resources allocated to the area, Boumehen has evolved into a marginalised enclave, primarily supplying low-wage construction labour for infrastructure projects in Pardis and Rudehen, while receiving few developmental benefits in return. This institutionalised neglect is reflected in Boumehen's deteriorating urban infrastructure and the expansion of informal settlements, including Ozun Tapeh. As of the 2011 census, Boumehen had a population of approximately 80,000, with around 5,000 residents living in informal settlements in Ozun Tapeh, many of whom occupied land without formal tenure.

The initial wave of land occupation in Ozun Tapeh began in the 1960s, on a small scale, primarily by local farmers and villagers. The land was originally owned by Lotfollah Hai, a Jewish landowner and former MP during the Pahlavi era.[8] Due to its hilly terrain, Ozun Tapeh was exempt from the 1963 land reforms and remained privately owned until its confiscation by the Foundation of the Oppressed following the 1979 revolution (Hooglund 1982). Despite the confiscation, the land remained largely undeveloped and was gradually occupied by various groups. Although ownership shifted from private hands to a charitable foundation, due to the low value of the land, Ozun Tapeh continued to serve as an informal residential area for migrant workers employed in nearby industrial zones, resulting in a pronounced class divide and limited access to urban services.

The first significant wave of migration to Boumehen and land occupation in Ozun Tapeh began in the 1990s, following the completion of a highway
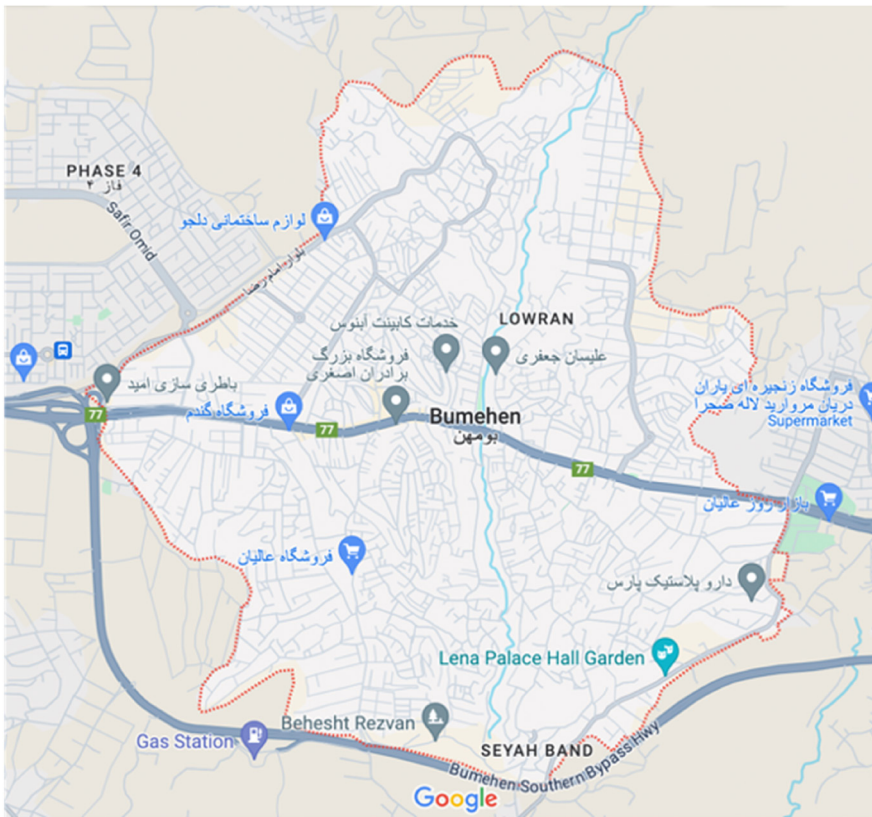
Figure 2: Boumehen municipal boundaries in red line and major highways connecting the city to Tehran. Source: Google map.

connecting Boumehen to Tehran and the establishment of Islamic Azad University in Roudehen. This infrastructure development triggered rapid growth in all adjacent townships (Figure 2). As a result, land values in Boumehen and Ozun Tapeh rose significantly, driven by both improved accessibility and population growth in Boumehen and its surrounding areas. When Boumehen was formally classified as an urban area in late 1998, the resulting surge in land prices drew the attention of multiple actors: the Foundation of the Oppressed, private developers, municipal authorities, and regulatory bodies overseeing construction, services, and land demarcation.

Land ownership conflicts in Ozun Tapeh intensified in the early 2000s, as new waves of migrant workers—many employed in construction in nearby townships, particularly Pardis New Town—began occupying land. Drawing on their construction skills, these settlers built homes on challenging terrain, transforming previously uninhabited areas into informal residential zones. In response to the growing scale of land occupation and construction, both the Foundation and the Municipality began to intervene, forming strategic alliances and employing spatial tactics to contest the settlers and advance their respective interests. The Foundation's initial response involved physically demarcating its claimed territory by constructing a perimeter road around the settlement, installing fences, and setting up control cabins to restrict access and separate the area from adjacent lands. For the Foundation, the primary interest was in

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the land's potential exchange value. As such, it aimed to halt further expansion and new construction to depress land prices, pursuing the common strategy of devaluation followed by revaluation. In contrast, the Municipality prioritised enforcing development boundaries, seeking to leverage its institutional authority over land regulation to increase municipal revenues through the 'formalisation' of land in Ozun Tapeh. Legalising the area would enable the Municipality to impose and collect taxes on land and housing, thereby enhancing its fiscal capacity.

This dynamic highlights the underlying tension between the Foundation and the Municipality regarding their respective interests, while also revealing their ambivalent roles in upholding a legal, fair and just response. Despite existing land and property laws (such as Article 31 and Article 143)[9]—with strong bases in Sharia law—in the case of Ozun Tapeh, we witnessed that both the Foundation and the municipality adopted coercive tactics towards residents, such as cutting off access to essential services like electricity and sewage to deter settlement and prevent further encroachment (Interview with resident, Nov 2018). Such measures fundamentally contradict the existing regulation to protect marginalised communities and the Foundation's purported redistributive principle, revealing a tension between its Islamic revolutionary egalitarian rhetoric and neoliberal urban practices.

It is essential to note that the land occupiers in Ozun Tapeh are not a homogeneous community. We identified three distinct groups occupying Ozun Tapeh from the 1960s onward: (1) displaced former farmers, (2) migrant labourers, and (3) speculative claimants. These groups maintain various relationships and interactions with local and religious authorities, including the municipality, the Foundation of the Oppressed, and the Friday prayer imam, to resolve conflicts and assert their ownership rights (Figure 3). For instance, interviews with migrant worker squatters indicate that the Foundation deals with speculative land claimants through financial arrangements or by drawing on their knowledge of other occupiers to deflect institutional scrutiny. These claimants act opportunistically, seeking profit rather than immediate use of the land. In Ozun Tapeh, they are usually nearby residents familiar with local social and political networks, using legal grey areas to assert control over disputed plots. Their behaviour contrasts sharply with that of farmers or migrant workers, whose occupation stems from housing needs and access to work. At the same time, the occupiers employed a range of survival strategies to sustain their livelihoods, including informal electricity connections, unauthorised access to water, and land occupation. Despite internal differences, they relied on networks of local knowledge and ethnic ties to maintain their land claims and resist eviction.

Our analysis revealed that speculative land claimants either view migrant worker occupiers as competitors to be evicted or as informants and messengers for their benefit, with whom they can form cooperative relationships. In this context, the Friday prayer Imam plays a crucial role in mediating between occupiers and influential entities, such as local and provincial governments, and the Foundation. Evidence from interviews with residents and municipal officials suggests that the Foundation offered to donate a parcel of land to the local mosque and the Friday prayer Imam to facilitate mediation and encourage
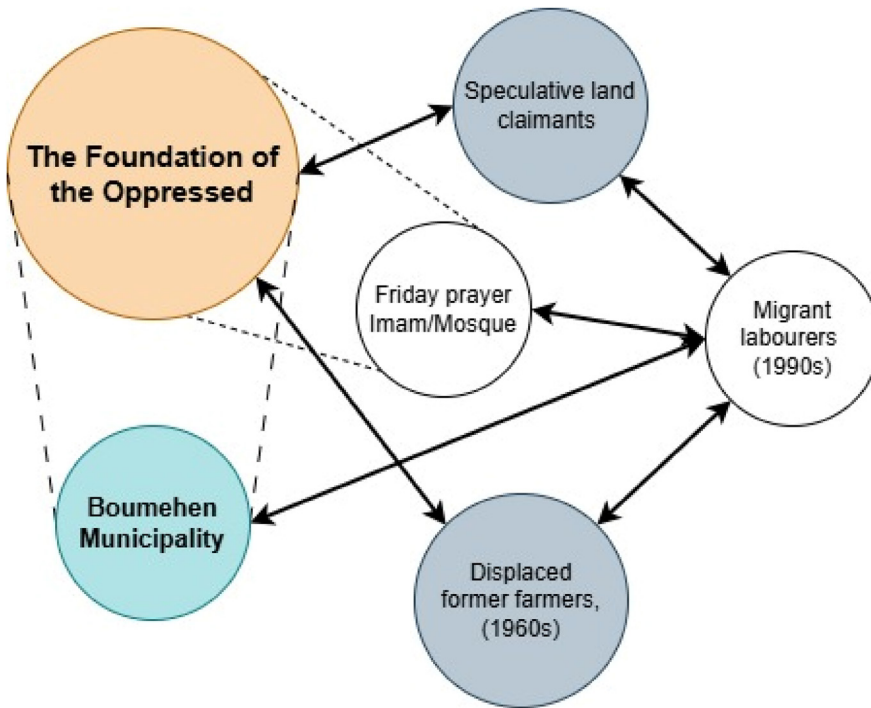
Figure 3: Actors involved in Ozun Tapeh Land Conflict. Source: Authors.

squatters and occupiers to relocate by providing alternative land provisions. In the absence of activist civil society organisations and grassroots movements, the squatters and occupiers come together during Friday prayers, religious festivals, and ceremonies to advance their interests, resist discrimination, and make collective claims. Interviewees noted that the Friday prayer Imam of the local mosque plays a key role in conveying the claims and needs of occupiers to the municipality and, ultimately, to the district governor. However, this arrangement appears to be particular to Ozun Tapeh, as clerical mediation varies significantly across contexts. The nature of this intermediary role depends on the Imam's political-ideological alignment and their propensity to either collaborate with or confront powerful institutional actors, such as the foundations.

The diverse and ambiguous roles of religious leaders, the Foundation, and the municipality demonstrate that Islamic discourse on socio-spatial justice in Iran is far from monolithic; it encompasses a plurality of perspectives shaped by actors operating at different scales and positions. In Ozun Tapeh, this diversity is evident in the role of local religious assemblies, which, despite limited authority, attempt to challenge robust Islamic charitable foundations in land disputes. The Friday prayer Imam, in particular, illustrates how alternative Islamic interpretations of justice can emerge within the same politico-religious framework. In contexts where the political regime suppresses grassroots civil society organisations, such religious actors serve as informal mediators and advocates, drawing on Islamic rhetoric to legitimise land claims and resist exclusion.

In Ozun Tapeh, religious gatherings and ceremonies also serve as platforms for collective mobilisation, enabling occupiers to articulate their demands and

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contest the top-down, populist interpretation of distributive justice promoted by revolutionary foundations. This results in a clash of discourses: one rooted in populist and politicised narratives of justice, and the other emerging from below, voiced by those originally intended to benefit from the revolution's egalitarian promises. Whether through the advocacy of a local Imam or the solidarity fostered by religious assemblies, the local community repurpose the language of justice to challenge institutional authority and assert alternative claims to land and rights. As a result, the dire living conditions of squatters at Ozun Tapeh garnered widespread media attention in 2018 and 2019, and their demand for basic services and infrastructure reverberated across various public platforms and official newspapers (such as IRNA and FARS news). Recent official news confirmed that after multiple rounds of negotiation between residents/occupiers and the Foundation of Oppressed, the occupiers were granted land rights with long-term mortgages in 2020 (IRNA 2020). While the precise bureaucratic mechanisms for transferring titles remain undisclosed, independent news sources indicate the Foundation allocated a land parcel and committed to constructing a primary school in the settlement (Ibid).

In exchange for recognising occupiers' land rights, the Foundation of Oppressed bargained with the municipality to bypass zoning laws for part of the land near the highway and change the land use to commercial. This exemplifies a symbiotic relationship between the municipality and the Foundation, driven by land ownership dynamics. Due to the Foundation's extensive landholdings in the region, the municipality frequently issues extensive permits for land use changes. The municipality's entrepreneurial approach to resolving the conflict, without safeguarding public interest, enables the Foundation to obtain land in other areas and maximise its revenues. Conversely, the Foundation occasionally transfers urban lands to the municipality as a compensatory gesture for the municipality's tacit acceptance of the Foundation's unauthorised activities. This dynamic shows how land conflicts transcend simple occupier-state binaries, revealing a complex interplay among institutional actors. The Foundation and municipality engage in simultaneous competition and collaboration, strategically advancing their institutional interests while marginalising community welfare concerns.

The Foundation's unsuccessful attempts to reclaim Ozun Tapeh from squatters suggest its primary objective was never relocation. Given the area's unfavourable topography and limited development potential, the Foundation instead sought to leverage its institutional position to extract land value through municipal negotiations—whether via development rights, land swaps, or parcel sales. This strategy reflects a calculated approach to value extraction that carefully balances ideological constraints (maintaining its justice-oriented image) with material gains, ultimately pressuring local communities and municipalities into agreements that maximise the land's exchange value.

Conclusion

This study has unpacked the hybrid nature of land governance in Iran by analysing the role of the Foundation of the Oppressed in shaping land appropriation and conflict in Tehran's peri-urban areas. Through the case of

Ozun Tapeh, we have demonstrated how this religious-political organisation operates within a hybrid governance framework, navigating between formal state institutions, informal land claims, and religious and political networks. We argue that the broad spectrum of practices employed by the Foundation in engaging with peripheral land governance and ownership disputes provides a valuable entry point for understanding its often-overlooked influence on urban planning and development in peri-urban contexts. Our analysis of the land struggles experienced by Ozun Tapeh's residents over recent years reveals the limitations of binary frameworks that either portray such foundations as beneficiaries of neoliberal state retrenchment or celebrate them as anti-imperialist Islamic entities resisting global capitalism. Instead, we contend that both welfare provision and anti-imperialist rhetoric serve as secondary concerns. The Foundation's actions reflect a strategic engagement with both neoliberal urban development and Islamic discourses of justice, producing a dual logic of redistribution and speculation. This duality underscores the need to critically reassess the role of religious-charitable organisations in shaping urban transformation—not as peripheral actors, but as central agents in the political economy of land and urban governance.

Our findings underscore a central paradox in Iran's land politics: revolutionary organisations, established initially to serve the dispossessed, have become key actors in land commodification and urban speculation. The Foundation's interventions in Ozun Tapeh—ranging from coercive spatial tactics to negotiated land transfers—demonstrate that land conflicts are not merely the result of state failure or informal encroachment. Instead, such conflicts are actively shaped by institutional actors pursuing economic and political interests under the guise of moral and religious legitimacy. We argue that this paradox fundamentally undermines conceptions of the public good across various segments of society, including among policymakers and planning practitioners. It opens the door to multiple, often conflicting interpretations of public good, thereby eroding shared values and weakening the normative foundations of urban planning and governance. The instrumental and ambiguous use of religious and legal definitions of public good by these foundations has had significant consequences for Iran's planning system. It has diminished public trust in local authorities and decision-making bodies, and weakened the relationship between municipalities, city councils, and the communities they are meant to serve.

The ambivalent role of the municipality and the erosion of trust between local authorities and the community are clearly illustrated in the case of Ozun Tapeh. Faced with institutional neglect and limited access to formal channels of negotiation, squatters were compelled to seek alternative avenues to voice their claims, most notably through the Friday prayer Imam, who emerged as an informal mediator and advocate. This reliance on religious authority underscores the failure of municipal institutions to engage meaningfully with marginalised communities. It also highlights how residents strategically repurposed Islamic rhetoric and religious platforms to challenge institutional authority and assert grassroots interpretations of justice and the public good. In doing so, they not only resisted exclusionary governance practices but also redefined the terms of engagement with the state, revealing the contested and negotiated nature of urban citizenship in Iran's peri-urban spaces.

In summary, this paper contributes to a growing body of scholarship that advocates for a more nuanced understanding of land governance and the role of religious and political actors in shaping urban transformation in the Middle East (Fawaz 2009; Bou Akar 2018; Taheri Tafti 2024). By presenting the complex and entangled relationships between religious institutions, state actors, market forces, and local communities in Iran through the case of revolutionary charitable foundations, we argue that these religious-ideological actors should not be viewed merely as welfare providers or extralegal entities, but rather as central players in the political economy of urban development. Operating across the spectrum of public and private, formal and informal, their actions carry significant implications for land governance, planning systems, the public good, and urban citizenship. We consequently urge deeper critical examination of these organisations' spatial practices and their evolving influence on urban and peri-urban socio-political landscapes.

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Notes

1   In 1979 Ayatollah Khomeini established the doctrine of *Velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist) to replace the monarchy with a system of Islamic governance rooted in Twelver Shiism. This doctrine holds that clerics should rule until the return of the Twelfth Shia Imam, with the Supreme Leader—initially Khomeini—holding ultimate religious and political authority. In this system, political and religious authority is transferred to the ulema (clergy), who are entrusted with custodianship over society, thereby combining spiritual and state leadership. In post-revolution Iran the Supreme Leader is head of the state and holds the highest political and religious authority.

2   Ummah refers to the global community of Muslims, it signifies a collective identity, a nation of believers, and encompasses Muslims of all races, nationalities, and social backgrounds.

3   Anfal—an Islamic legal category encompassing confiscated properties, abandoned lands, and res nullius (e.g., forests, rivers), for more on Anfal see Vahabi (2024).

4   Goftogu was a long-running Persian-language quarterly (1993–2023) that provided a critical forum where scholars, writers, and public intellectuals examined current social and cultural questions in Iran.

5   The project was led by Seyed Reza Hashemi, with contributions from Aydin Torkameh, Haman Hajimirzaei, Amir Tohrani, Atena Alavi, Atena Kamel, Rashid Bahiraei, Shahnaz Rouhnavaz, Behrang Sedighi, Azar Tashakor, and a co-author of this paper Iman Vaghfi.

6   Housing Foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the revolutionary foundations that was founded in 1979 by the order of Ayatollah Khomeini to provide housing for the underprivileged and low-income people in rural and urban regions, as well as the reconstruction of areas suffering damage from natural and man-made catastrophes.

7   The First Five-Year Development Plan (1990–1994) report is available through the website of Islamic Parliament Research Centre of the Islamic Republic of Iran—http://rc.majlis.ir/en.

8   See more on Lotfollah Hai The centre for historical document survey.

9   Article 31—Every Iranian individual and family hold the right to adequate housing commensurate with their needs. The government must facilitate the realisation of this right, prioritising disadvantaged groups—especially rural populations and labourers—in its implementation.

Article 143—Any person who cultivates or develops arazi-ye mowat (dead/unused land) or mobahat

(unclaimed land) for residential or agricultural purposes shall acquire legal ownership of said land.

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