

The Centrality of Tehran in Iranian Sociopolitical Life



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“Persia is ruled by Tehran and Tehran is ruled by perhaps three hundred men...”¹

The above words penned in 1922 might still provide an apt description of political life in Iran almost a century later. Tehran, which became the capital in 1786, continues to be the epicenter of Iran’s cultural, economic, social and political life. The revolution of 1979 did not manage to diminish the significance of the capital city. Viewed through the prism of empirical data, the salience of a development plan centered on the capital city in pre- and post-revolutionary Iran becomes palpable.

Consider the following facts. In the mid-1960s, Tehran served as the headquarters of all Iranian banks, insurance companies, and fiduciary institutions. 83% of all television antennas, 77% of all beds in medical hospitals, 71% of all telephones, and 62% of all passenger automobiles were located in the capital. When it came to human capital, 73% of all university students, 69% of those with college education, 56% of all workers employed in factories of ten persons or more, 48% of all licensed physicians, and 37% of all workers in the electricity, gas, and water industries called Tehran home.² These totals led one commentator to write: “By any yardstick, it would seem that the political action of Tehran street sweepers is more significant for the future of the regime than the pains and pleasures of the elites of a host of provincial towns.”³

¹ James Moncreiff Balfour, *Recent Happenings in Persia* (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood & Sons, 1922), p. 90.

² All data taken from Marvin Zonis, *The Political Elite of Iran* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 140-141. Another account provided by Ferydoon Firoozi states that in 1966 Tehran had 29% of all workshops, 36% of all workers, 53% of college graduates (24,659), 58% of engineers (5,463), 66% of master’s degree holders (3,038), and 53% of doctorate degree holders (7,499). See Ferydoon Firoozi, “Tehran: A Demographic and Economic Analysis,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1 (Jan. 1974), pp. 60, 70.

³ Leonard Binder, *Iran: Political Development in a Changing Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), p. 161.



The concentration of power, jobs, resources, cultural happenings, and attractions in a cosmopolitan city with a robust industrial-commercial culture persuaded millions of Iranians after the revolution to head toward the capital to seek jobs or to benefit from superior life amenities (airport, hospitals, schools, shopping centers, etc.). As can be seen in Figure 1, the city's population grew by more than 3 million between 1976 and 2006 thanks to both demographic growth and in-migration.⁴ Since the high cost of real estate made living in the capital city unaffordable for many, others settled in various locales within Tehran province.⁵ So while the population of the city itself grew at an average rate of 1.5% per year, metropolitan Tehran grew at a rate of 4.7%. Hence, the city of Tehran's share of the total province's population dropped from 85% in 1976 to 50% in 2006. Between 2006 and 2011, a total of 480,537 people migrated to Tehran province from other provinces.⁶ Meanwhile, according to the Tehran municipality government, on average one million people visit Tehran every day.⁷

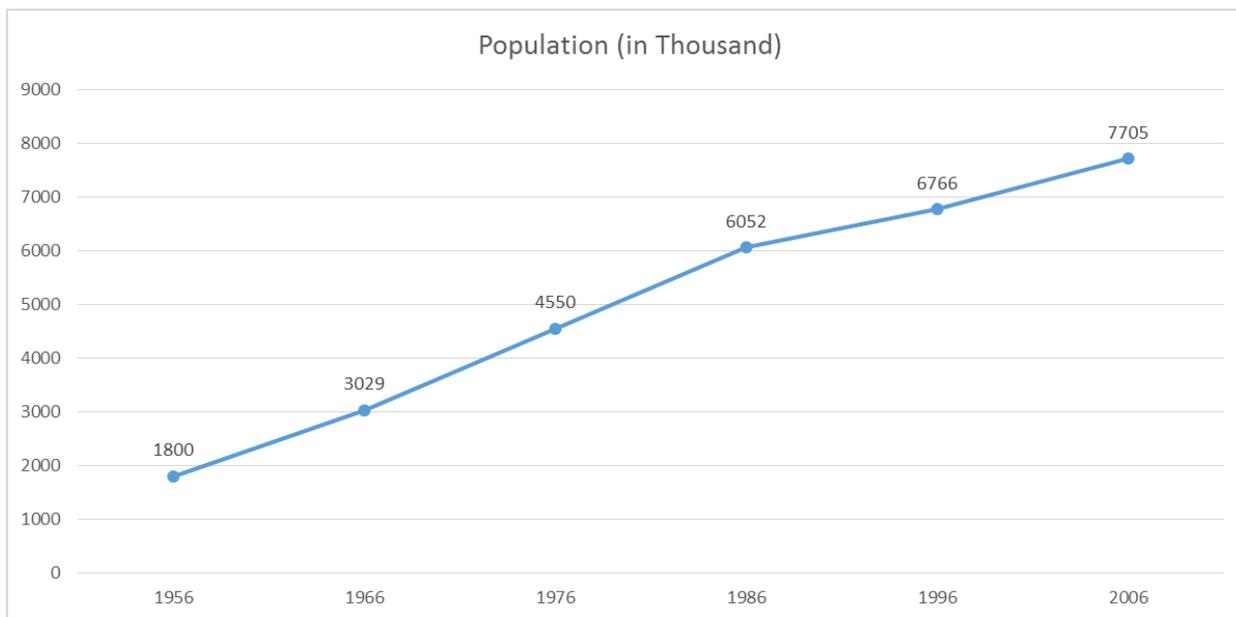
⁴ Tehran continues to have the highest in-migration rate of all provinces.

⁵ Tehran was established as a province in 1947 but was mostly known as the "Markazi [Central]" province. In 1977-78 it was reestablished as Tehran province and "Markazi" became a separate province with Arak as its capital. In 1997, the two provinces of Qazvin and Qom were carved out of the former Markazi/Tehran province, and finally in 2010 the province of Alborz was established with the city of Karaj as its capital.

⁶ http://nnt.sci.org.ir/sites/apps/yearbook/year_book_doc/91-99-02.pdf

⁷ <http://tmicto.tehran.ir/Portals/0/Document/Amarname/Shahr92/index.html>

Figure 1. Population of the City of Tehran



Source: Gholamreza Latifi and Seyyed Mohammad Basatiyan, “Payamadha-ye Amniyati Nashi Az Tamarkozgara-ye dar Kalan Shahr-e Tehran [Security Consequences of Centralization in the Super City of Tehran],” *Jame'ehpazhuhei-ye Farhangi*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Bahar va Tabestan 1391/Spring and Summer 2012), p. 129.

According to the 2013 statistical yearbook, while Tehran province accounts for 0.8% of Iran’s land mass, it is home to 16.2% of the country’s population (12.1 million out of 75.1 million).⁸ The province is 87% urban compared to a median of 71% for the entire country.⁹ Some 92.8% of all people living in Tehran province are urban dwellers.¹⁰ Between 2006 and 2011, the demographic growth rate of Tehran province (1.44%) was slightly higher than the national average of 1.29%.¹¹ The land mass of the city of Tehran itself is 700 square kilometers, and once we take into account its suburbs the land mass grows to 1,400 square kilometers.¹² As can be seen in Figure 2, the land mass of Tehran has doubled compared to what it was in the mid-1970s. As of 2006, Tehran accounted for one-fourth of the total urban population of Iran and had more population than 400 other cities (with less than 50,000 people) combined.¹³ A city divided into

⁸ <https://www.sabteahval.ir/Upload/Modules/Contents/asset99/salname92.pdf>

⁹ After the tiny province of Qom, Tehran is the second most urban province in Iran.

¹⁰ <http://tmicto.tehran.ir/Portals/0/Document/Amarname/Shahr92/index.html>

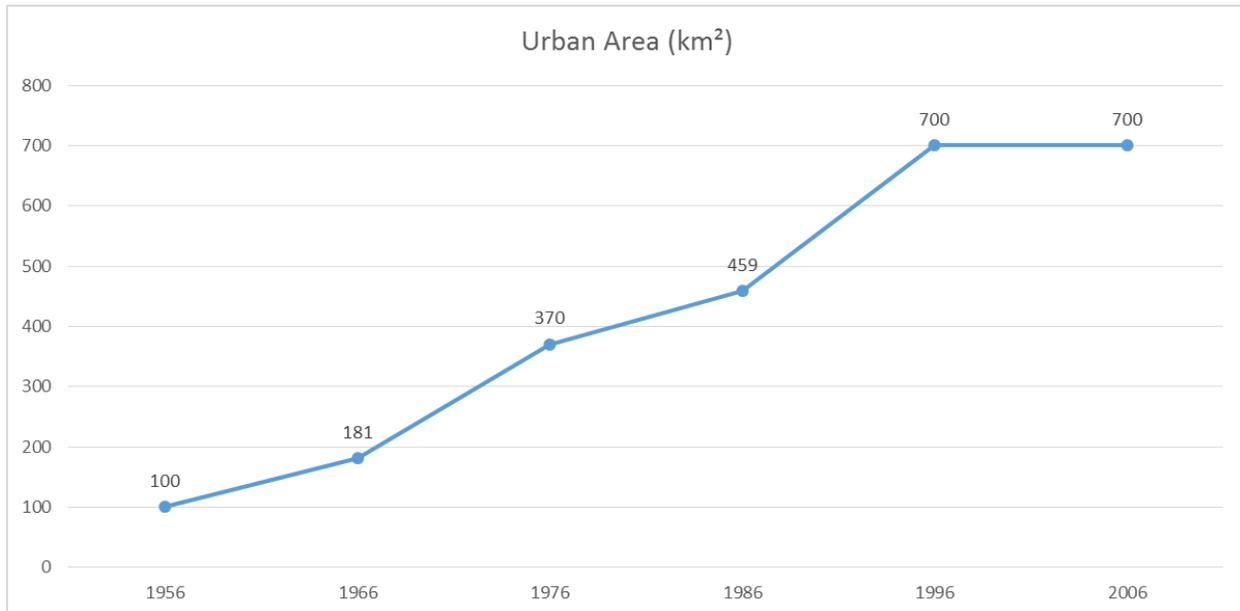
¹¹ <https://www.princeton.edu/irandataportal/socioecon/stats/>

¹² <http://tmicto.tehran.ir/Portals/0/Document/Amarname/Shahr92/index.html>

¹³ Latifi and Basatiyan, “Payamadha-ye Amniyati Nashi Az Tamarkozgara-ye dar Kalan Shahr-e Tehran,” p. 128.

22 districts,¹⁴ Tehran is the third largest metropolitan city (after Cairo and Istanbul) in the Middle East and one of the top 20 cities in the world in terms of population density.

Figure 2: City of Tehran's Land Mass



Source: Gholamreza Latifi and Seyyed Mohammad Basatiyan, "Payamadha-ye Amniyati Nashi Az Tamarkozgara-ye dar Kalan Shahr-e Tehran [Security Consequences of Centralization in the Super City of Tehran]," *Jame'ehpazhuhei-ye Farhangi*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Bahar va Tabestan 1391/Spring and Summer 2012), p. 129.

As the seat of power, Tehran is the political nerve center of Iran and the most closely watched city both by the state and its opponents. Of the 235 current registered political parties and groupings in Iran, at least 147 (63%) have their main headquarters in Tehran.¹⁵ 14% of the seats (38 out of 270) in the parliament are allocated to Tehran deputies. 27% (67 of the 246) of individuals who have served as ministers in post-revolutionary governments (1979–2015) were born in Tehran province, and indeed "Tehranis" have been the majority of 13 of the 14 cabinets that have served from 1979 to 2015.¹⁶ Moreover, 40% of those who have served as Prime Ministers have also come from Tehran.¹⁷ Many Majlis deputies, ministers, and mayors have been educated at academic institutions in Tehran. Indeed, Tehran University has educated more

¹⁴ <http://en.tehran.ir/Default.aspx?tabid=88>

¹⁵ <http://www.moi.ir/portal/File/ShowFile.aspx?ID=b7b2efc0-7623-4f68-8120-a32797b785e6>

¹⁶ These data are extracted from the author's current research on the Iranian political elite.

¹⁷ Interestingly enough, however, no one born there has yet served as Supreme Leader, President, or Head of the Judiciary or the Supreme Court.



members of the pre- and post-revolutionary political class than any other institution of higher education.

There are around seven and a half million eligible voters in Tehran province. Their voting turnout since 1979 shows that they are most engaged, by rank, in presidential elections (average participation rate of 50%), Assembly of Experts elections (average participation rate of 47%), parliamentary elections (average participation rate of 44.6%), and municipal elections (average participation rate of 21%, which is the lowest of any province). Tehran voters have proven themselves as vanguard in electing females to the Majlis. While 18 of Iran's current 31 provinces have never elected a female to post-revolutionary parliaments, 27 of the 50 females (54%) elected so far (1980–2015) have hailed from Tehran.¹⁸

In terms of the economic landscape, while Tehran's pre-revolutionary dominance has somewhat declined, it is still the center of banking, commerce, and industrial activity in the country. 60% of financial assets in the banking system are concentrated in Tehran. On average, Tehran accounts for 24% to 26% of the country's GDP, a larger percentage than any other province.¹⁹ In 2013, 23 Tehran-based insurance companies covered close to 30 million insurance policies.²⁰ Moreover, Tehran province accounts for the highest literacy rate of all provinces (90.4%),²¹ the highest internet penetration rate among urban populations (51.5% in 2012),²² the highest price of land per square meter, and the highest average monthly rental cost.²³ The capital city also serves as the transportation hub and national logistics node for a large amount of goods and services. As for government bureaucrats employed in Tehran, while their actual number has gone up from 197,706 in 1966 to 290,473 in 2011, as a percentage of all government employees, Tehran's share has dropped from 29.9% in 1966 to 12.9% in 2011.²⁴

Tehran province is also the pulsating cultural capital of Iran. In 2012, 2,922 journals and



¹⁸ Some of these 50 women were elected more than once to the parliament. Another indicator of how the residence of Tehran may have more “liberal” views on gender roles can be gauged by the fact that Tehran has the highest median marriage age for females (25.1) and males (29.2) in the country. See <https://www.sabteahval.ir/Upload/Modules/Contents/asset99/salname92.pdf>

¹⁹ For one example, see [https://www.princeton.edu/irandatportal/socioecon/topics/government/4.-OSTAN-CONTRIBUTION-TO-GROSS-DOMESTIC-PRODUCT-1379-83-\(2000-04\).xlsx](https://www.princeton.edu/irandatportal/socioecon/topics/government/4.-OSTAN-CONTRIBUTION-TO-GROSS-DOMESTIC-PRODUCT-1379-83-(2000-04).xlsx)

²⁰ <http://tmicto.tehran.ir/Portals/0/Document/Amarname/Shahr92/index.html>

²¹ <https://www.princeton.edu/irandatportal/socioecon/stats/>

²² <http://tmicto.tehran.ir/Portals/0/Document/Amarname/Shahr92/index.html>

²³ <https://www.princeton.edu/irandatportal/socioecon/topics/housing/prices/>

²⁴ This is due to the fact that the total number of government employees has increased from 662,664 in 1966 to 2,250,692 in 2011. In other words, the total of Iranian government personnel has increased by 0.65% annually over the course of the last 45 years. See <http://www.princeton.edu/irandatportal/socioecon/topics/labor/force/>

103 daily newspapers were published there.²⁵ This means that more than 70% of all daily newspapers are published in Tehran.²⁶ 67% (6,000 out of 8,900) of all book publishers and most printing shops are based in the capital city as well.²⁷ Some 1,200 bookstores and 380 libraries (including the National Library) operate in Tehran.²⁸ As of 2013, 40.5% (111 out of 274) of all Iranian cinema halls were located in Tehran province (in 1965 this figure was 43%).²⁹ 134 art galleries,³⁰ 31 permanent theater halls, and some of Iran's best museums are in the city. Tehran also plays host to an annual international book fair and has the country's largest sport complex (with 100,000 seats). There are more than 40 institutions of higher education in Tehran and most of Iran's scientific research centers are in the capital as well.³¹ In the 2006-07 academic year, more than one-fourth of all college students and one-fifth of all high school students studied in Tehran.³² In the 2013-14 academic year, some 14,637 full-time faculty taught in the city's institutions of higher education.³³

At the same time, Tehran also suffers from major social ills. It is ranked first in terms of alcohol consumption, sexual crimes, theft, drug addiction, and number of imprisoned criminals.³⁴ In 2013 alone, over 24 million kilogram of drugs were confiscated by the authorities in Tehran province leading to the arrest of 63,489 individuals.³⁵ In 2012 and 2013, Tehran province respectively accounted for 21.7% (32,713 out of 150,324) and 18.8% (29,252 out of 155,369) of all registered divorces in Iran and came out dead last in terms of the raw rate of registered marriages.³⁶ Since it serves as the economic nerve center and seat of government (all ministries and a good number of public authorities are located there), corruption is very prevalent.



²⁵ <http://tmicto.tehran.ir/Portals/0/Document/Amarname/Shahr92/index.html>

²⁶ In 1966, 95% of all daily newspapers were published in Tehran.

²⁷ Tehran's Mayor puts the figure at 70%. See <http://jamejamonline.ir/online/1945000288546427860>. Also see <http://hamshahrionline.ir/details/53997>

²⁸ <http://jamejamonline.ir/online/1945000288546427860>

²⁹ http://www.cinemadاران.com/Ar_News/1392/02/News_In_1392-02-28.html and <http://tmicto.tehran.ir/Portals/0/Document/Amarname/Shahr92/index.html>

³⁰ <http://galleryinfo.ir/Gallery.aspx>

³¹ <http://www.msrt.ir/fa/Pages/MainMenuPages/Corp/Ghotb.aspx>

³² Mehrdad Mashayekhi writes that "during the 1970s, two-thirds of all college students and one-third of all high school students studied in Tehran." See Mehrdad Mashayekhi, "The Politics of Nationalism and Political Culture," in *Political Culture in the Islamic Republic*, edited by Samih Farsoun and Mehrdad Mashayekhi (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 90.

³³ <http://tmicto.tehran.ir/Portals/0/Document/Amarname/Shahr92/index.html>

³⁴ See <http://tmicto.tehran.ir/Portals/0/Document/Amarname/Shahr92/index.html> and Latifi and Basatiyan, "Payamadha-ye Amniyati Nashi Az Tamarkozgara-ye dar Kalan Shahr-e Tehran," p. 133-135.

³⁵ <http://tmicto.tehran.ir/Portals/0/Document/Amarname/Shahr92/index.html>

³⁶ http://nnt.sci.org.ir/sites/apps/yearbook/year_book_doc/91-99-02.pdf and <https://www.sabteahval.ir/Upload/Modules/Contents/asset99/salname92.pdf>

Overpopulation, pollution, groundwater depletion, waste disposal, traffic jams, and woefully inadequate facilities constitute some of the other challenges facing this mega city. On a number of occasions, politicians and scholars have floated the idea of moving the capital to another city to both deal with the above social problems and the possibility of a devastating earthquake that could paralyze the country's political life. However, so far these suggestions have not found any traction.

One of the other most troubling facts about Tehran's evolution is the changing composition of its religious minorities. As can be seen from the table below, over the course of the last four decades the percentage of all non-Muslim religious minorities in Tehran has substantially declined as many decided to emigrate or were forced to leave the country. The drop in the Christian community (Armenians, Assyrians, and other denominations) in particular from 3.42% to 0.38% is most noticeable. If we were to juxtapose the concentration of religious minorities in Tehran against their total number in Iran in 1966 and 2011 we see the following numbers: Tehran's share of all Iranian Jews has dropped from 65.4% in 1966 to 52% in 2011; the share of Christians has dropped from 62.4% to 39.7%; the share of Zoroastrians has dropped from 47% to 34.7%; and the share of other religious affiliations has dropped from 39.6% to 23.2%.³⁷

³⁷ Firoozi, "Tehran: A Demographic and Economic Analysis,"
<https://www.princeton.edu/irandataportal/socioecon/census-data-1/1966-census/1966-Census.pdf>;
http://www.princeton.edu/irandataportal/socioecon/census-data-1/2011-census/2011_Census_Persian.pdf



Table 1. Number and Percentage of Religious Minorities in Tehran*

Year	Total Population	Assyrians	Armenians	Other Christian Denomination	Jews	Zoroastrians	Other
1966	2,719,730	10,125 (0.37%)	72,122 (2.65%)	11,034 (0.40%)	39,701 (1.46%)	9,353 (0.34%)	30,515 (1.12%)
2011	12,183,391	14,913 (0.12%)	29,953 (0.24%)	1,813 (0.01%)	4,557 (0.38%)	8,768 (0.07%)	11,425 (0.09%)

* The figures for 1966 are for the city of Tehran and the figures for 2011 are for the Province of Tehran.

Sources: Ferydoon Firoozi, "Tehran: A Demographic and Economic Analysis," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1 (Jan. 1974), p. 64; and

http://www.sci.org.ir/SitePages/report_90/ostani/ostani_population_report_final_permission.aspx

Conclusion

What the above factual listings demonstrate is that Tehran has played a disproportionate role in Iran's political, economic, and cultural life both before and after the 1979 revolution. In the political realm, centralization (concentration and monopoly of political power) has been inimical to democratic political development. In the economic domain, Tehran has overshadowed the other provinces and this dynamic has insured the uneven development of the country. As long as these dynamics remain undisturbed, a culture of grievance against "Tehranis" will continue to permeate the discourse of those not living in the capital city.