



Suburbs of Tehran: the role of urbanistic, social and cultural factors in the social geography of Tehran metropolis

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Bernard Hourcade

SUBURBS OF TEHRAN: ROLE OF URBANISTIC, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL FACTORS IN THE SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY OF TEHRAN METROPOLIS

The social and cultural geography of Tehran metropolis has significantly changed over the last four decades. Until the 1970s, the capital city of Iran, like almost all the other cities of Iran (with perhaps the exception of Esfahan and its “oasis”), was surrounded by rural areas, with scattered villages and agricultural irrigated lands or sub-desertic areas.¹ Since the 19th century, the deprived population of Tehran used to settle outside the southern gates of the capital city. These first “suburbs” were the preludes of the large suburban areas where 45% of the population (5 million inhabitants) of the whole Tehran metropolis are living today (Table 1, Fig. 1). These suburbs are located in the plains of the foothills of Alborz Mountains from Hashtgerd to Varāmin, including Karaj, which is now the fourth largest city of Iran (1.6 million inhabitants in 2011). The rural areas are now transformed by urban settlements surrounding the old villages or by new towns (*shahrak*) built *ex nihilo*, which include not only poor population but also a new middle class of migrants who have come from the city of Tehran and from almost all the provinces of Iran and who have no link with the old villages or small cities of the former rural surroundings of Tehran.

These new cities and new suburbs, which did not exist four decades ago and have experienced a tremendous demographic growth (Table 2), have no place in the traditional Iranian culture where city dwellers used to live with peasants or nomads. The populations, places, cultures, history, ideas, hopes, and behavior of these new suburbs are almost “unknown.” Few academic studies have been published regarding these areas and populations. The number of books or articles on Karaj, Qarchak, and Eslāmshahr should be considered since most unpublished studies are conducted by city planners for the construction of local or regional master plans. Tehran with its 22 districts often ignores the new suburbs whose population commutes and works every morning in the city center and uses the facilities of the capital city.² In 2011, the new province of Alborz was created around Karaj, further complicating the global understanding, knowledge, and management of the Tehran metropolis, especially that of the suburbs.

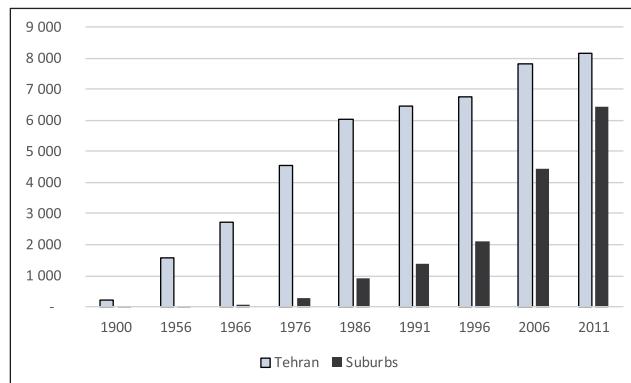


Fig. 1. The rapid growth of the suburbs of Tehran.

	1900	1956	1966	1976	1986	1991	1996	2006	2011
Tehran (000)	200	1560	2719	4530	6042	6475	6759	7798	8154
Suburbs (000)		8	40	87	297	918	1363	2114	4455
Suburbs (% of total metropolis)	3.8	2.5	3.1	6.2	13.2	17.4	23.8	36.4	44.2

Table 1. The rapid growth of the suburbs of Tehran 1900–2011

Many questions arise and few answers are given, but some facts can be highlighted regarding the social and cultural geography of the Tehran metropolis. The main and a well-known sociocultural divide between the north and south of Tehran seems to be less relevant today than the new discrepancies between Tehran and the surrounding areas. Such a situation has obvious consequences concerning the management and daily life of the metropolis, in addition to the political dynamics of the city and the country. New migrants from many ethnic origins, young people, workers, and less educated people are living out of Tehran's old city, in new cities, where cultural facilities (cinemas, cafés, cultural centres, and sporting facilities), education, and medical care are rare or of lower quality.

1. NEW CITIES AND CONTROVERSIAL HOUSING CONDITIONS

The main difference between Tehran and the suburbs is their respective rates of growth (Table 2). Many cities did not exist as an urban administrative unit 20 years ago; most of them still have an average annual rate of growth above 3% (2006–2011), whereas Tehran, where dwelling conditions are too expensive, has a rate of only 0.9%.

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City	Population 2011	Growth 2006–2011	City	Population 2011	Growth 2006–2011
Tehrān	8154 051	0.9	Nazarābād	107 806	2.0
Karaj	1614 626	3.1	Mohammadshahr	100 519	3.8
Eslāmshahr	389 102	1.7	Andīsheh	96 807	5.1
Malārd	290 817	4.9	Robātkarīm	78 097	4.4
Qods	283 517	4.3	Bāghestān	71 861	6.5
Golestān	259 480	2.3	Bāqershahr	59 091	2.4
Shahrīār	249 473	5.7	Şāleḩābād	56 356	0.8
Varāmīn	218 991	0.9	Būmehen	53 451	4.4
Pākdasht	206 490	10.2	Meshkīndasht	53 440	4.0
Qarchak	191 588	1.9	Hashtgerd	51 953	2.7
Nasīmhahr	157 474	3.0	Māhdasht	51 518	3.6
KamālShahr	109 943	6.4			

Table 2. Population of the largest cities of the provinces of Tehran and Alborz (2011) and annual rate of growth 2006–2011 (%). Source: *Statistical Centre of Iran*.

With its old urban fabric and high-density population, Tehran presents a different social and urban landscape than the suburban areas where the population is younger and living in new cities that did not exist or were small villages 40 years ago. With its large size (7 million inhabitants), extensive history, and strong identity, Tehran is clearly a contrasting cultural world compared with all the other cities such as Karaj, which seems to operate as a village despite its huge population.³ Most of these new settlements are medium-scale cities, with between 50 and 300 thousand people, and look similar when compared with Tehran; however, each one is developing their own identity or is based on a real or mythical historical background. For instance, Eslāmshahr is proud of its emergence during the Islamic Revolution.

However, some smaller cities, with fewer than 50 thousand inhabitants, have preserved their cultural and historical background but are also rapidly surrounded by new and often unpleasant villas and multistorey buildings despite being located in the plains of Karaj and Varamin (Shahriar, Robat Karim, and Hashgerd). Most summer resorts in the mountains of Alborz, such as Lāvāsān, Fasham, and Dāmāvand, are also facing this urban revolution and are now inhabited by many families working every day in Tehran. Even Firuzkuh or Taleghān, which are more isolated in the mountains, are involved in the dynamics of Tehran metropolis. The new network of transportation by freeways and rapid trains is far from being fully efficient; however, this makes it possible for the working population to commute

daily between remote small cities without working or social facilities toward Tehran.

There are no large slums in and around Tehran metropolis since the Islamic Revolution provided an opportunity for many people to build their homes without a construction permit and, sometimes, on confiscated lands. This was the basis of the “revolutionary housing” and the growth of suburbs.⁴ Most houses have basic facilities for water and electricity, especially in the larger cities where the majority of houses have been built in the last four decades. However, as shown in the map of the rate of dwelling units built with semi-resistant materials (Fig. 2), the contrast in housing and living conditions is obvious between Tehran and the suburban cities and villages where many families are living in a single room.

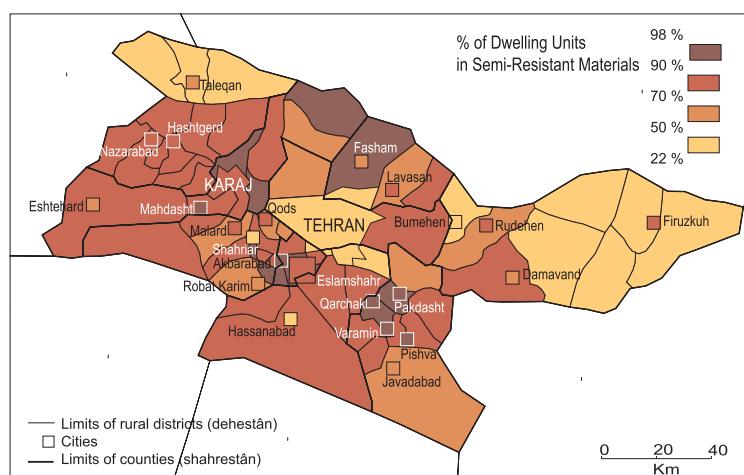


Fig. 2. Dwelling unit built with semi-resistant materials (wood and raw bricks). Source: *Atlas of Tehran Metropolis*.

The dominant landscape is now a continuity of the urban fabric between Tehran and the new suburban cities or industrial compounds that have taken the place of former agricultural lands often abandoned, waiting to be built up. This new and developing urban landscape does not mean homogeneity. The contrast between Tehran and the surrounding areas is clear, but in this large region (more than 120 km between Hashtgerd and Varāmin), the architecture, housing conditions, and the social or cultural life are not homogeneous on the local scale.

The valleys of the Alborz Mountains are unique with old traditional isolated villages, summer and winter resorts, with villas built by Tehranians. In the foothills

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and the large plains between the mountains and desert, the natural conditions are good and abundant water is available in many places where a new “bourgeoisie” is living in modern villas, especially in the gardens to the south of Karaj. A city such as Eslāmshahr is clean with trees and large avenues despite the average low income of the population and has become the new “capital” of southern Tehran, with a strong cultural identity and social life.⁵ However, Nasimshahr (formerly Akbarābād), at a short distance, does not share this “prosperity.” Numerous new migrants and lower income populations cannot afford to live in new modern cities and are forced to live in smaller old towns without basic facilities and in rural areas where “villages” of several thousand inhabitants have low housing conditions. This diversity should not conceal some unicity with Tehran. Indeed, these cities and villages share a genuine cultural and historical identity for having developed rapidly in the political context of the Islamic Revolution.

2. THE YOUNG AND WORKING POPULATION OF NEW MIGRANTS

The mean age of the inhabitants is 27.6 years (1996) in Tehran and 25.0 years in other places of the province. This is because the number of children (0–14 years) is much higher in the suburban areas (33.8%) than in Tehran (30.7%) (Fig. 3). The situation in the mountainous areas is specific to elderly people living in villages

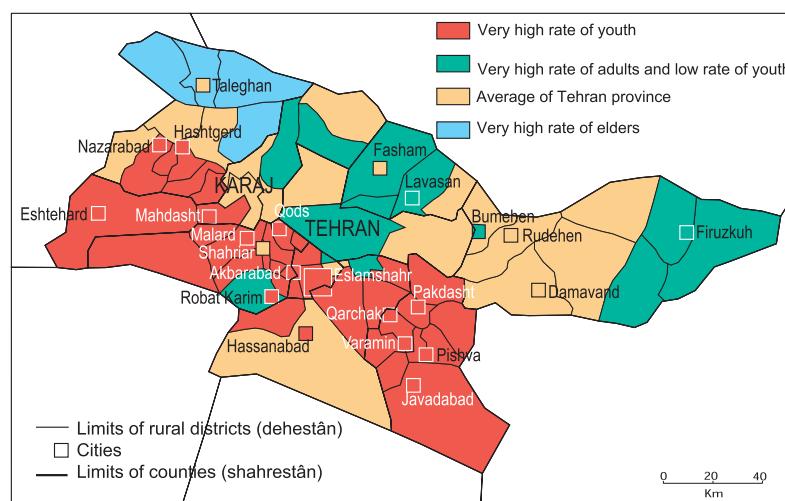


Fig. 3. Typology of ages in the Tehran Province. Young population in the plains, south of Tehran, and adults and elders in the capital city and mountain areas. Source: *Atlas of Tehran Metropolis*.

abandoned by adults working in the cities of the plains around Tehran. In this young society, parents are facing problems with regard to the education of their children since the quality and number of high schools and training or higher education facilities cannot be compared with that in Tehran where numerous young adults have fewer children and more opportunities for education and training.

The job opportunities are also more limited in the suburbs (Fig. 4). In all the large cities like Tehran, Karaj or Eslāmshahr most jobs are in administration and services; however, in smaller settlements, in the whole region surrounding Tehran in the south, the majority of the population work in industry (30% to 48% of the working population in the Eastern and Southern suburbs) and construction although there is a high rate of unemployment. Such a situation has both an economic and cultural impact and is apparent in most of the metropolis of the world but is strengthened by the notion of ethnicity, or more precisely, by the presence of new migrants different from those who have been living for a long period in Tehran, with more experience of urban culture, and who can afford the high standards of living in the capital city.

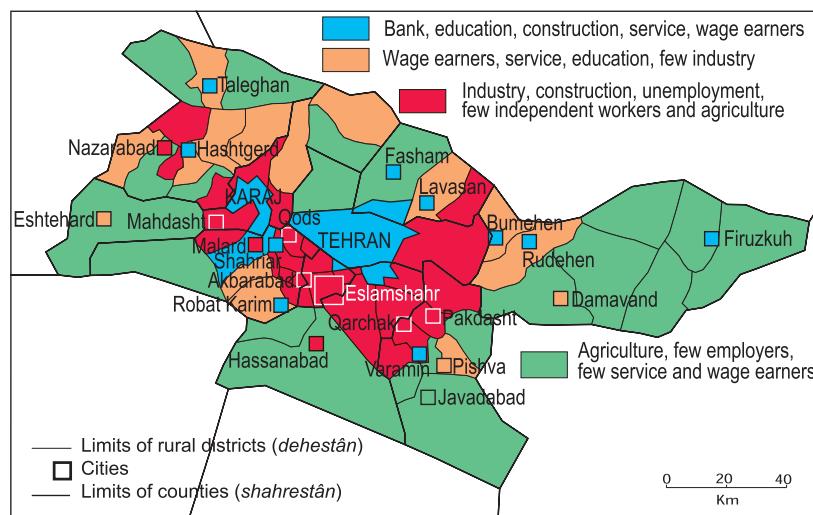


Fig. 4. Typology of employment in the Tehran Province (1996).
Source: *Atlas of Tehran Metropolis*.

Having arrived in the vicinities of Tehran during the recent times, the migrants from the same origin concentrate in certain towns or quarters. In Tehran, the new migrants are scattered in all districts, and there are no specific boroughs for any ethnic group. However, in the Western and Southern suburbs (Eslamshahr, Karaj,

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, more than 70% of the migrants are Azeris (Fig. 5). In Karaj, the Kurds from Kurdish provinces of Iran as well as families of former refugees from Iraq are numerous. The northeastern part of Karaj is sometimes called the “capital city of Kurdistan.” In the Eastern suburbs, near Varāmin, the ethnic situation is different since the origin of migrants is more diverse, with numerous families from Khorasān or Māzandarān. The historical city of Varāmin, with its old identity and local population, has a low annual rate of growth (0.9% between 2006 and 2011) since the new migrants are prevented from settling and have to settle in Qarchak, for instance.

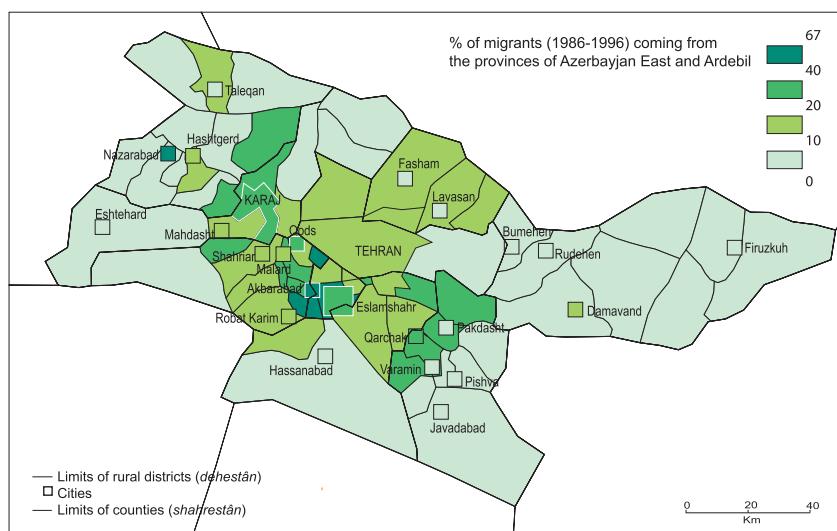


Fig. 5. The migrant population from the provinces of East Azerbāyjān and Ardebil (1986–1996). Source: *Atlas of Tehran Metropolis*.

This cultural identity has, until now, limited public visibility. The ethnic situation is apparent but not a social or political issue since these families have left their province to create a better life near Tehran, and their ambition is focussed on income, education for their children, health, and new opportunities offered possibly by a large metropolis. This population is also deeply involved in the social life of Tehran where they go every day to work. The Azeris of Eslāmshahr, Nasimshahr, and Karaj were not really involved in demonstrations even when there were major public protests in the Azeri Province of Iran. This strong presence of a Turkish-speaking population has existed in the Tehran Province since the Qajar era. However, the new factor is the difference between the old Azeri population of Tehran, sponsored or protected by some influential or rich relatives of the bazar, the army, or the

administrative agencies, and the newcomers whose sponsors are moderate workers or relatives, having a limited capacity to offer jobs or homes.

3. THE NEW SOCIOGEOGRAPHIC DIVISION OF GREATER TEHRAN: ROOTS OF CONFLICTS OR OF BETTER INTERACTIONS

Social and political life seems to be quiet in the suburbs of Tehran. Because most of the population is occupied with working, seeking further income, or solving many problems of daily life, they are not involved in social or political networks. However, local upheavals frequently occur regarding specific issues such as water, transportation, lack of public services, or some private ethnical conflicts. Coexistence prevails, but this silence may conceal the emergence of a new sociopolitical crisis. The old division between northern and southern Tehran and the opposition between central urban Iran and the surrounding rural provinces remain as a basic paradigm for the political and social geography of Iran. But, focusing on the example of Greater Tehran, a new paradigm seems to become more important: the global opposition between the core of the old traditional cities open to globalization, and their suburbs. This phenomenon is new in Iran. Today, the suburbs of Tehran are too underdeveloped to create new dynamics, but it may be possible in the future with the strengthening of their cultural and social identity.

Evidently, the urban space, society, culture, and economy of Tehran are quite different from those of the suburbs, and the policies at work seem to increase these discrepancies. In 2005, the creation of the master plans for the Tehran municipality and for Tehran Province did not include the links and the positive complementarity between the two spaces. Tehran strengthened its identity and its separation from Karaj and the other cities. A large green zone of parks and forest, a wide “no man’s land” has been developed in the western parts of the capital to separate the capital city and the elite from other lands of different identity.

The political life and elections help understand the social change, dynamics, and problems. In 2011, the creation of the province (*Ostan*) of Alborz around Karaj aimed to make the management and development of the main city of Greater Karaj and the surrounding areas easier since the same policy prevailed in Tehran. However, the relations between a metropolis and its surrounding areas are a global issue that cannot be solved in such a way.

The political marginalization of the suburbs remains a key issue, which is obvious in the organization of the elections. The Tehran Province has 35 members of parliament (MP) (one MP for 350,000 inhabitants), while the new province of Alborz

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has only 3 MPs (one for 800,000 inhabitants). In short, the inhabitants of Tehran are politically twice more powerful than their neighbors of Karaj.

For the parliamentary elections, the constituency of Tehran, with 30 MPs, includes the shahrestāns of Shemirān, Tehran, Rey, and Eslāmshahr. This political unit is not linked to any historical, management or development entity, and was an attempt to hide the discrepancies and possible political oppositions between the city of Tehran and its suburbs.

In the last parliamentary elections in 2016, all the MPs elected in the huge constituency of Tehran were members of the “Hope” faction (Reformists and supporters of President Rohani), a situation that was analyzed at the national level as a major success for the policy of international opening of the newly elected president. Tehran metropolis, the capital city of Iran, was shown up as the leader of the whole country. The second meaning of this political fact was the idea that the deprived people of Eslāmshahr and the wealthy inhabitants of northern Tehran have the same political opinions: wishful thinking regarding the positive unicity of the whole metropolis or a way to conceal the reality?

The reality is indeed more complex since conservative candidates were elected in many suburban areas such as Varāmin, Karaj, and the entire Alborz Province. This diverse political geography seems closer to the sociocultural discrepancies apparent between the “modern” Tehran and suburban areas that were newly built, maintaining traditional or conservative political attitudes with different reasons.

The political landscape of Greater Tehran is even more complex when considering the vote for the last presidential election in 2013, which was less controversial than local elections. It shows a clear division between the Alborz Province, Eslāmshahr, and northern Tehran supporting Hassan Rohani and Varāmin and the southeast of the Tehran Province that appeared to maintain their conservative and traditional opinions (Fig. 6).

This landscape does not hide the opposition between Tehran and the suburbs. Rather, it reveals the old and surviving division between, on one side, the deprived districts of southern Tehran joining the old southeastern suburbs of Varāmin and Qarchak, and, on the other side, the center and north of Tehran having common political pro-reform dynamics with the new “modern” suburbs of Karaj, of which many inhabitants are employees, often of Azeri origin, working in the modern industrial plants of the western areas of the Tehran/Alborz provinces.

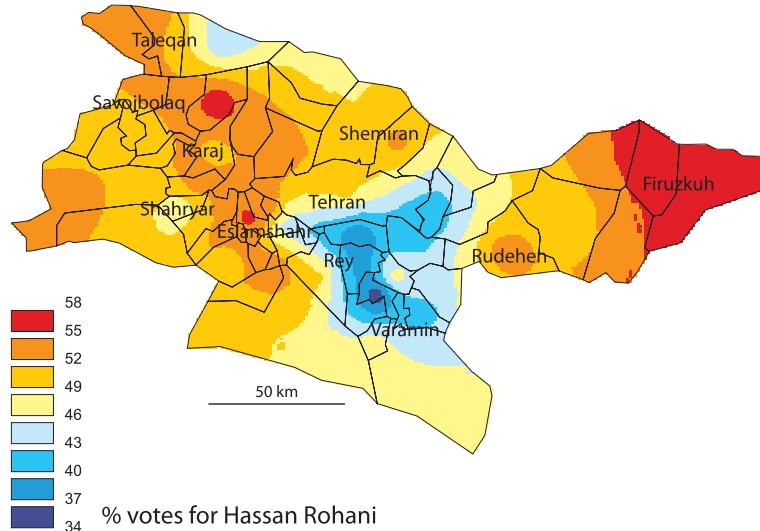


Fig. 6. The presidential election of 2013. The vote for Hassan Rohani in the Tehran Province.

The question of where the sociocultural dimensions and the dynamics of the discrepancies between “modern” Tehran (limited to northern neighbourhoods or including the whole municipality) and the new suburbs lie needs to be addressed. However, this question cannot be dualistic, and the answer is widely determined by the following combined factors: urban landscape, housing, education, employment, income, and ethnic data. A possible axis of explanation of the identity of these diverse urban areas could be found in the history and memory, real or mythical, of the strong capital city more proud of its high trees than its high towers and of the new territories where the populations, the landscapes as well as the trees, are too young and the identity is still being formed.

NOTES

- ¹ This situation is obvious in the map of the Tehran Region drawn by A.F. Stahl in 1995. See Rahnema'i (1992) from note 3.
- ² For example, the research and publication *Atlas of Tehran Metropolis* (Habibi and Hourcade, 2005, see note 3) was the first study of the whole metropolis but was only supported by the Municipality of Tehran and not by the administration in charge of urban management of the Tehran Province. Collaboration between the two administrations was not possible. The second volume of the *Atlas* (Badri, 2011, see note 3) did not study the suburbs.
- ³ See the following short bibliography on suburbs of Tehran;
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- ⁴ Bernard Hourcade and Farhad Khosrokhavar, “L'habitat révolutionnaire à Téhéran, 1977-1981,” *Hérodote* 31(1983), 62-83.
- ⁵ Mohsen Habibi et al. “Adaptive Comparison.”