



## *A Social History of Modern Tehran*

Tehran, the capital of Iran since the late eighteenth century, is now one of the largest cities in the Middle East. Exploring Tehran's development from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, Ashkan Rezvani Naraghi paints a vibrant picture of a city undergoing rapid and dynamic social transformation. Rezvani Naraghi demonstrates that this shift was the product of a developing discourse around spatial knowledge, in which the West became the model for the social practices of the state and sections of Iranian society. As traditional social spaces, such as coffeehouses, bathhouses, and mosques, were replaced by European-style cafés, theaters, and sports clubs, Tehran and its people were irreversibly altered. Using an array of archival sources, Rezvani Naraghi stresses the agency of everyday inhabitants in shaping urban change. This enlightening history not only allows us to better understand the contours of contemporary Tehran, but to develop a new way of imagining, talking about, and building "the city."

ASHKAN REZVANI NARAGHI (1983–2020) was Assistant Professor in the School of Urban Planning and Design at the University of Tehran. He received his PhD in Urban Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 2016 and his article on middle-class urbanism appeared in *Iranian Studies* in 2017.

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Space, Power, and the City  
Ashkan Rezvani Naraghi

Frontmatter

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# A Social History of Modern Tehran

Space, Power, and the City

ASHKAN REZVANI NARAGHI

*University of Tehran*



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*To Yazdan and Aftab*

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## *Foreword*

If Isfahan is half of the world, as a famous Persian proverb stipulates, Tehran surely has been the epicenter of modern Iran. A megalopolis with one of the largest populations in the region, Tehran represents the monstrosity of modern city development for some, and the aesthetic beauty of urban life for others. The present study captures these sentiments and dilemmas beautifully and with a rather unique authorial voice that is at the same time empathetic and analytical. It is only in this way that Ashkan Rezvani Naraghi could position Tehran as a microcosm for his wider analysis of Iranian society, and the joy and travails of everyday life of ordinary Iranians in particular.

In this ambition, the author connects rather neatly to the avant-garde of Middle Eastern and Iranian Studies that is showcased by the Global Middle East book series, in order to move the discourse about this area of the world into uncharted territories. The present study makes a unique and indelible contribution to these movements beyond. I am employing these trans-spatial analogies on purpose here, as they represent the methodological backbone of Ashkan's study, thereby heaving the reader into new realms of understanding, not only of the dynamics in Tehran, but comparably cosmopolitan urban centers all over the world. This is not a confined book – like Tehran itself, it speaks to a global audience.

In this effort to dissect and traverse Tehran as a spatial concept, the book tells the tales that turn living in this megacity at once into a challenge and woeful excitement. For instance, one of the author's interlocutors beautifully connects such sentiments to women's bathhouses by comparing them to entering a joyful picnic. The analysis frames the anecdote: In the olden days during the Qajar dynasty in the nineteenth century, bathing was an excuse for socializing. As a result, these gender-exclusive spaces became particularly important as centers of feminist organization and therefore always also had a political significance beyond the joy and happiness of social interaction that they enabled.

Ashkan shows in great detail, with the help of wonderfully curated primary materials that he gathered through his fieldwork, how between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, traditional social spaces such as coffeehouses, bathhouses, *zūrkhānihs*, and *taktyihs* were slowly transformed into European ideal-types such as cafés, theaters, cinemas, hotels, restaurants, and sports clubs. In a central conceptual narrative permeating the present study, Ashkan shows how this transformation of spaces yielded radical changes of urban society in Iran that merged into repeated upheaval and ultimately revolution. *Space, Power, and the City* – the subtitle of the book – captures those dynamics perfectly.

Undoubtedly, the interdisciplinary approach taken speaks to various central themes in the current social sciences that break away from a narrow understanding of Iranian and Middle Eastern Studies which the Global Middle East book series underlines. The present book positions itself beyond and in-between emerging disciplines as it charts new territory in its emphatic connection between everyday life, material spaces, and politics. As such, this dive into the vast urban landscapes that delineate contemporary Tehran turns this city into a perfect case study to understand everything that is human about us. In this manner, the present book breaks away from any disciplinary confines, exactly because it traverses its subject matter with such elegant and inviting rhythm.

Arshin Adib-Moghaddam

## *Preface*

The brilliant, thoughtful young man who wrote this book died before he could see its publication. Dr. Ashkan Rezvani Naraghi perished in an avalanche in the mountains above Tehran soon after completing this manuscript, and shortly before the birth of his second child. He was a gifted mountaineer, and the tragedy that took him from us took another eleven lives as well. But we have the privilege of hearing his voice again with the publication of this manuscript. Ashkan's children are still too young to read this book, but my hope is that in a few years these pages will be one way for them to feel his presence in their lives. I hope they will be inspired by his deep curiosity about the world, his meticulous search for the vital details of urban life, and his abiding belief in doing good in and for the world.

Ashkan created vital friendships and communities wherever he went. His students and colleagues at the University of Tehran are particularly in my thoughts as I write this – for them this loss was especially stark. His death leaves a profound absence at the heart of so many communities. A young professor with a bright future, a devoted mentor, teacher, researcher, and writer, gone from one day to the next.

One of the greatest honors of my nearly three decades in academia is to have been chosen by Ashkan as the chair of his dissertation committee. The relationship between advisee and advisor can, at its best, be a connection of great mutual trust and warmth – this was the case for us, and I miss him terribly. When I first met him, I knew I was in the presence of a unique mind, and a remarkable person – a feeling shared by so many of us at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, particularly those of us affiliated with the Urban Studies programs. He was beloved by faculty and fellow students alike – an inquisitive, supportive contributor to every class discussion, and an inspiring model of academic curiosity and collegiality. We have planted a beautiful Turkish filbert tree in the heart of campus in his honor – this type of tree thrives in Iran and Wisconsin alike, just as Ashkan did. I am

certain that, were he writing these acknowledgments, Ashkan would offer heartfelt thanks to the other members of his dissertation committee: Afshin Marashi, Amanda Seligman, Arijit H. Sen, and Kristin Sziarto. Nancy Mathiowetz also worked closely with Ashkan, and has been so supportive of my work in bringing this manuscript out into the world.

Bringing this book into the world would have been impossible without the gracious assistance of so many people. Above all, I send love and gratitude to Ashkan's widow, Setareh, for her assistance in tracking down computer files, for her blessing of this project, and for her friendship from afar. Second, on Ashkan's behalf I extend immense gratitude to Cambridge University Press. In the hours after I heard the news of his death, adrift in the face of this unbearable loss, I took the only action I could think of – I went digging through my email in the hopes of uncovering the name of his editor at Cambridge. I was in luck and was able to reach out to Maria Marsh and begin to make arrangements to continue with the publication of the book. Atifa Jiwa kindly stepped in when Maria went on parental leave. Cambridge's Emily Sharp, Rachel Imrie, and especially Lisa Carter played central roles in bringing the book to publication. In addition, I want to thank (on Ashkan's behalf), Lisa DeBoer (indexing), Gary Smith (copy editing), and Balaji Devadoss (typesetting) for their careful, thoughtful work on this manuscript. Setareh and I are both immensely grateful for their support and assistance. I am also grateful to Arshin Adib-Moghaddam for writing the foreword and, with his co-editor Ali Mirsepassi, supporting so many aspects of the publication process. So many thanks are also due to the Sharmin and Bijan Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies at Princeton University, for their generous support of the work of indexing the book. Mehdi Heris and Georgia Brown provided important assistance along the way. There are many other people that Ashkan would thank if he were here with us – to those unnamed in this preface, please know that your friendship and collegiality are woven into the pages of this manuscript. The publication of this book reflects the work not only of Ashkan, but also of the communities he cared for and that cared for him.

Jennifer A. Jordan