BLANK SLATE: SQUARES AND POLITICAL ORDER OF CITY

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Abstract. This paper aims to analyze the square beyond an architectural element in the city, but weaves this blank slate, with its contemporary socio political atmosphere as a new paradigm. As a result, this research investigates the historical, social and political concept of Meydan – a term which has mostly applied for the Iranian and Islamic public squares. This interpretation, suggested the idea of Meydan as the core of the projects in the city, which historically exposed in formalization of power relations and religious ideologies. In this sense, studying the spatial transformation of Iranian public squares introduces the framework, which is adaptable to contemporary urban context.

Keywords: Meydan, paradise, sovereignty, Iranian squares, urban transition, spatial transformation.

Introduction

In 1983, the French philosopher *Roland Barthes* in his book *Empire of Signs*, introduced the squares as the political orders in the ideogram of the city. Further, he argues that Tokyo offers this precoius paradox: "It does possess a center, but this center is empty. The entire city turnes around a site both forbidden and indifferent, inhabited by an emporar who is never seen, which is to say, literally, by no one knows who" (Barthes 1983: 30). Similarly, *Rossi* proposed to see the city as a place formed by politics (see Rossi, Eisenman 1982). According to *Aurelli*, architecture is always political, agreeing with *Mouffe* that architecture is an expression of hegemonic orders (that is, authority structures), and so cannot avoid being political in some manner.[1] In approaching such a concept, *Arendt*, referring to the Greek Polis, defines the city as the only place that can provide the conditions to be political (Arendt 1998: 63).

For clarifying the issue of political here, which goes beyond the political activism, an Aristotelian definition of man as political animal can be addressed whose ultimate goal, happiness, can only be secured through the exercise of his political nature. Drawing upon Aristotle's ideal the Islamic socio-political Thinker Abu Nasir Farabi, in his political treaties states that humans cannot attain the perfection they are destined to outside the framework of political societies. Farabi envisioned an ideal or perfect city, under a philosopher-king for mankind to attain happiness through living in a perfectly guided city (see Macarimbang 2013: 73–92). In other words, the political understanding of the concept of Iranian city has always been entangled into the theological concepts.[2] Regarding this issue, urban space of traditional Iranian cities was the medium through which different mechanism of power; theological sovereignty and social control took place. This idea was reinterpreted during the Islamic era, in which God was believed to be the center of the whole world (Nasr 1987). According to Burckhardt, Iranian architecture attempts to create a space without any mediators between man and God, as emptiness (Burckhardt 1970).

Following this introduction to the discourse of political in relation to urban form, the structure of the paper revolves around the central concept of Meydan (square). In 1990, *Michael Webb* in his book

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[1] For more debates on the agonistic public spaces and democratic politics see Mouffe 1993. For more readings on the relationship between architectural forms, political theory and urban history see Aureli 2008 and 2011: 32–37.

[2] For more information on the radically political (Carl Schmitt's term) dimension to the Iranian city See Khosravi 2014.

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The City Squares, introduced the square as a symbol of authority, and as the seed which the city would grow. Webb introduced the new world as a *blank slate* on which people had the oppurtunity and duty to God and King to write (Webb 1990: 104). With this introduction, this research enables a posssibility of recalling cognitive, symbolic and cultural relatioship between urban form and archetypes attached to cities that have not been mentioned before in the proceess of modern city poject. Thus, the image of square as public space leads us to the inescapable logic of Agora in ancient Greek and Roman Forum to Tiananmen Square[3] in Beijing in the spring of short-term release (May 1989) and the murder of three thousand insurgents and events in Tahrir Square during the "Arab Spring". This line connects the concept of square not only to the Agora and Forum as political space for democratic decision-making in ancient Greek or Roman republic, but to a more general sense, also blinds as "scene" (arena /scène).

Building upon this theoretical framework, respectively the historical, social and political concept of Meydan – a term which has mostly applied for the Iranian and Islamic public squares – is reintroduced in the first part, as the embodiment of the square in the image of the Islamic Persian city. Since this paper aims to connect basic thoughts, ideologies, foundations and frameworks in urban history of Iranian square, the most predominant concepts of Persian Squares in shaping the ideogram of the city represented. The politico-religious foundations of Iranian square as Space of "Sovereignty", "earthly Incarnation of celestial paradise" and "city's courtyard" will be investigated. This article defines the Islamic city as a sovereign political community, which modernity transformed its urban form and social function. The next parts, "Square as Locus of Power" and "Escape from Square" and "Insurgent Squares", expands the concept of Meydan and situates it in contemporary historical context. These parts particularly explore the very concept of square through autocratic modernity.

Meydan

Events from February 2013 to January 2014 in Ukraine, that continues to this day and has become an international crisis, also brought with it a special word: Maidan or in Russian (майдан) with the same pronunciation; Since the center point of riots and protests in Kiev's main square was exactly the same place which they called Maidan. In terms of genealogy, this ottoman legacy from the Arabic and Persian roots, is spacious open space which was a gathering place of people to come together, play polo, horse riding and especially to see the shows, including public horrible deaths (torture, bombardment, public executions ...). Respectively, Maidan is a Ukrainian word for "Square, Open Space", ultimately from Arabic language maydan, via Turku-Persian transmission, Persian meydan meaning "field, Park, Open Space, Square". The Arabic word originally meant "horse-racing ground; hippodrome". The etymology of the word equivalent in European languages brings us to Greek and Latin plateau, which was called Agora[4] in political situations and Forum[5] in Roman politics.

The word Meydan has pre-Islamic roots in maita-ni (hippodrome), and in the case of Persian cities, it has been observed that each city had at least one central square, used for trade and public gatherings (Mehan 2016a: 547). Michael Webb, in his book "The City Squares", argues that traditional square has been shaped by commerce and defense, political systems and cultural traditions, climate and topography (Webb 1990: 20). In its most common functional definition, Meydan denoted a public space of social interaction, especially to accommodate the need for temporary or daily markets and as a place to showcase the conduct of justice (grants of privilege and public executions).[6] Historical evidence suggests that in its initial stages, the Persian square took shape in association with the state authority and governmental headquarters. The main concept of Iranian public square was first made in Persian- Hellenic city from 9 B.C to 3 A.C which was a multi functional center for cultural, official and commercial purposes.

The first appearance of public squares in the cities of ancient Iran was in the junction of the routes that were ending at the gates of the city. The most important re-

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[3] What makes this square so remarkable is that China had no tradition of public squares. Mao cleverly inserted his vast plaza along the imperial axis, as a symbolic conservation of his legitimacy but the model in form and function, was Moscow's Red Square. As a consequence, a million Chinese jammed Tiananmen Square in Beijing in May 1989, demanding democratic rights and defying the government's threats of a crackdown, see Webb 1990: 177–178.

[4] Ancient Agora is an archetypal public space for the European city and its architectural plot has become a subject of many interpretations and influences. Lewis Mumford has described the Agora as a refined version of a gathering place, irregular and unenclosed. For Greeks of the classical era, Agora was the essential component of a free polis, a symbol of democracy and the rule of law, see Webb 1990: 28–29.

[5] Roman tribes established their first forum as a symbol of union, market and meeting place. *Fora civilica* and *Fora venalia* were special places for assembly and for sale of fish. For centuries, Roman Forum was the center of the city's political, religious and social life, see Webb 1990: 29–31.

[6] For more comprehensive debates on the Safavid Maydan see Babaei 2015: 175–217

maining of those cities is the city of Persepolis or Parse, which has been built around 518 B.C., and hold the great attention in terms of architecture and city planning because of its alleys, streets and public spaces, which indicate an advanced stage of planning of the cities. It appears that the square was built in the vicinity of royal palaces and major political centers and considered as a place for ceremonies and political gatherings.

In the pre-Islamic period, particularly at the time of the Sassanid, squares were spaces allocated to religious rituals or official ceremonies. In certain cities they were positioned near royal palaces and gates, and chiefly used for military parades. In this era, Square is a place where bazaars open up so it is not shaped as a "planned" urban element (Habibi 2003: 34). During the Sassanid empire (AD 224–651), the expansion of internal commerce and the development and growth of cities led to the creation of commercial trade centers. This transformation can be regarded as the representation of public squares instead of royal squares in Iranian history of architecture and urbanism. Historical analysis shows that Sassanid city with political, military and central government domain has found a deeper consistency comparing to the past periods. Also the urban society and the body of the Sassanid city have been under the influence of religious ideologies, social ideals and worldview of that period (see Khalatbari, Partovi Moghadam 2010: 50–70). Swiss photographer, *George Gerster* in the book entitled *Ancient Iran* took an aerial photograph of the first known Sassanid city; Gur (also called *Firuzabad*) (Fig. 1).

It's distinctive circular plan, is divided into 20 parts, radially structured and extends over a plain

Fig. 1. Drawing Aerial photo of the Sassanid circular city of Gur
Source: (Gester 2010)

Fig. 2. Plan of the round city of Baghdad in the 10th century, the peak of the Abbasid Caliphate
Source: (Soutif 2016)

crossed by pathways, drainage ditches, and irrigation channels. The tower at the center of the city was essential for measuring the radial lines and also had a symbolic significance as the focal point of the empire, which later became the model for the plan of Baghdad (City of Peace) in the eighth century (Gester 2010) (Fig. 2). According to the ninth-century Arab geographer and historian *Yaqubi*, author of *The Book of Countries*, Baghdad's trade-friendly position on the Tigris close to the Euphrates gave it the potential to be "the crossroads of the universe". By the time Yaqubi was writing, Baghdad has already become the center of the world (Yaqobi 1861). The perfect circle was a tribute to the geometric teachings of Euclid. According to 11th-century scholar, *Al Khatib al Baghdadi*, Four equidistant gates pierced the outer walls where straight roads led to the center of the city. The very center was empty except for the two finest buildings in the city: the Great Mosque and the Caliph's Golden Gate Palace, a classically Islamic expression of the union between temporal and spiritual authority (Marozzi 2014). Accordingly, the mosque was the premier public space in the Islamic city, the equivalent of the Agora in the ancient Greek city and the public square in the medieval Western city (Grabar 1969). For Webb, the Meydan created as a unified composition at the command of one ruler, which represented in *Temple Mount* of *Jerusalem* as one of the most sacred and oldest urban spaces, which has evolved over three millennia (Webb 1990: 25–27). Generally, in the lands dominated by various cultural practices of Islam, the architectural concept of the Meydan (Or Arabic Maydan) may have taken myriad shapes, reflecting also the etymological hybridity of the term itself. According to *Sussan Babaei* "The idea of an articulated public urban space in the early cities of late Antique Period, where newly arrived or converted Muslim residents integrated into their urban

planning the functional and spatial possibilities presented by the survival and memories of the Roman Fora and Byzantine hippodromes" (Babaei 2015).[7]

Rabbat argues that in the case of the numerous Islamic cities, the open space of the main congregational mosque may consciously, replaced the Agora[8] in both its urban and political functions. Rabbat states that type of open space, called Maydan, already existed in the Arab cities. It was introduced as a hippodrome for equestrian exercises when most of the Arab cities were ruled by military dynasties in the pre modern period (Rabbat 2012: 198–208). In the case of Iranian cities, when *Shi'ism* spread throughout the country, public religious ceremonies such as rituals of *Moharram* and *Ramadan* – in which people had active roles both as spectators and performers – intensified the need for public spaces. *Tekkiiyehs* and *Hosseiniyehs* (halls used as religious ceremonies) began to build to meet their needs (Kheirabadi 2000). The conquest of Iran by Islam (637–651 A.D), led to the end of the Sassanid Empire and the eventual decline of Zoroastrian religion in Iran.[9] Therefore, the mosques as the centers of religion started to be added to the previous important elements of Persian cities. After the rise of Islam, the gathering spaces in Persian cities have been the platforms of mosques and bazaars. The meaning of Square in Iran as the center of cultural, economical and official exchanges has mostly been derived from the city planning of the Seleucid Empire in 312–63 B.C. (Mohammadzadehmehr 2003).

Square as courtyard of the city

Gideon suggested that the impact of religion on architecture could be explained by man's desire for a prolongation of life and for a constitution of existence after death in ancient Middle Eastern architecture (Giedion 1981: 9). According to Gideon, the joy of celebrating under the sky but within the enclosure of courtyard houses evokes a sense of continuity and eternal existence (Giedion 1981: 138). Based on Sumerian cosmology, the universe consisted of heaven and earth (An-Ki), which was united until Enlil (God of air), se-

Fig. 3. Aerial photo of Naghsh-e Jahan Square
Source: Archnet.org

parated them. Faozi Ujam believes that this ideology was recreated in courtyard architecture, which embodied the reunification between earth (the courtyard) and heaven (the sky).[10] Regarding the sacred significance of the courtyards, Campo believes that courtyards evoke the paradise. The Greek word παραδεισος [*paradeisos*] was adopted from Persian, and refer to the supreme bliss of Eden or the reward of the faithful as promised in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic texts. Since Xenophon's use of the term *Paradeisos* for the Cyrus the Great garden (Fauth 1979), Persian gardens have been associated with their historical Achaemenid precedents, interpreted as earthly symbol of celestial Paradise. Etymologically, the very root of the word can be traced in the Old Avestan term *pairi-daêzā*, which literally means "Surrounded by Walls". The original description of paradise in the *Avesta* illustrates an image existence inside paradise. So, conceptually, paradise is strongly associated with the idea of emptiness and "Blank Slate" (Fig. 3).[11]

The ideal concept of city for the Persians was firmly bound to the ultimate goal of creation, which according to Mazdaean-Zoroastrian ideology is "happiness for

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[7] See Sussan Babaei "Sacred Sites of Kingship: The Maydan and Mapping the Spiritual Vision of the Empire in Safavid Iran". In *Persian Kingship and Architecture: Strategies of Power in Iran from the Achaemenids to the Pahlavis*, by Sussan Babaei and Talinn Grigor, 200. I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2015.

[8] The *Agora* was a political and a religious center, a place of complex associations, a place for producing craft, buying and selling, but also a place for law, politics, philosophy and religion.

[9] According to Thomas Walker Arnold, Muslim Missionaries did not encounter difficulty in explaining Islamic tenants to Zoroastrians, as there were many similarities between the faiths. For the Persian, *Ahura Mazda* and *Ahriman* meet under the name of *Allah* and *Iblis* (see Arnolds 1896).

[10] For more information on cosmological genesis of the courtyard house see Ujam 2006: 95–107.

[11] The earthly image of Paradise is one of illustrated in the Athanasius Kircher's *Arc Noë*, as a walled domain located between the Tigris and Euphrates in Mesopotamia. It is formed as an enclosed square plan; four gates, which are guarded by four angels, facing the four cardinal points. In the middle of the domain two bodies of water meet and the Tree of life is located. It is where Adam and Eve are illustrated by the ree of nowledge positioned in the bottom left corner of the paradise, see Kircher 1675: 230.

mankind".[12] Similarly, Farabi, Islamic Philosopher, (1985) in his political treatises premises that the humans can only attain the perfection they are destined to inside the framework of political association or in his terms "Societies of People". In this sense, Farabi referred to an excellent or ideal city as a city-state through which its inhabitants co-operate to achieve happiness. Farabi emphasized that this condition is only possible under the sovereignty of a ruler, whose decision is analogous to God's act (see Al-Farabi 1985: 237). By the vast use of this model in Iranian plateau, paradise developed in to archetypical forms of built environment to expand the empire, peace and happiness. In illustrating an Islamic paradise, the Qur'anic theme was picked off and woven into later Muslim literature on terrestrial gardens. Quran speaks of four types of river in celestial paradise, which inspires the four-part design of the Persian garden.[13] Lehrman argues about threefold attraction of establishing gardens in Iran as follows: first was the idea of paradise as a reward for the faithful, based on many references to the Paradise Garden in the Quran. Second was the secular tradition of the royal pleasure garden in Iran. Third was the particular response to the demands of terrain and climate in Iran, with its predominant dryness and heat.[14]

The typical enclosed and central courtyard[15] prevalent in Mesopotamian and Iranian houses was used in Iranian square in a grand scale. Central courtyards in between masses of solid volumes reflect the important role of emptiness in Iranian architecture. The only elements that are allowed in emptiness are the vital natural elements: green and water. In this sense, the Iranian Courtyard is a terrestrial incarnation of heaven. According to Nader Ardalan, an Iranian contemporary architect: "[The] courtyard as the manifestation of the centripetally oriented form of the microcosm, the hidden, may be viewed as mutually complementing and thereby completing aspects of spaces" (Ardalan, Bakhtiar 2000: 68).

In Iranian history, this particular reading of paradise resulted in shaping a spatial archetype that promoted specific urban form: the Meydan. According to Kamran Afsharnaderi – contemporary Iranian architect – the Iranian plaza was conceived as a city courtyard, which emphasizes its boundaries while the center is always empty (Afsharnaderi 2007). The idea of a central empty space, as an introverted characteristic, implied explicitly in courtyards or urban squares that should be seen as "uncovered rooms of the city".

Square as political locus of "Sovereignty"

Safavid dynasty (1501–1736 AC) that is approximately coincides with European Renaissance, often referred to as the first geo-politically stable dynasty after introduction of Islam to Iran (Blair, Bloom 1995). The works in Safavid dynasty are also known as the symbol of Persian art, architecture, and urbanism, which were affected by three major factors including: Power, Religious Beliefs and Symbolism. Safavid era is also known to have strong inclination towards religion and Iran became distinctly different form surrounding countries which all followed Sunni Islam. Consequently, power and religious beliefs during Safavid period created the Iranian identity. These three factors that were influenced by people, have been manifested in public squares of Safavid era.[16] Political power in Safavid era has used architecture and planning to convey its messages, especially through large public spaces, which have been loaded by the power's favorite symbolic messages. The Safavids embodied a royal status infused with spiritual authority to maintain the politico-religious and territorial integrity of the empire.

Regarding the development of power, French Philosopher, *Michele Foucault*, states that one of the key parts of discipline, as a technique in a disciplinary society is control of space. The other way of increasing the power of authorities is by bringing the similar people in a place to absorb others who share the same belief and giving sacred values to the place (Foucault 1995). During the Safavid period, many Shi'a clergies

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[12] According to Achaemenid inscriptions, it is the King's (the emperor's) duty to restore the lost happiness of mankind. It has been written in Darius's tomb (Naqš-i-Rostam): "The great God is Ahura Mazda; who created the earth; who created the sky; who created mankind; who established happiness for mankind; who made Darius the king…".

[13] The word *Chahar-bagh* literally means "four gardens" and is based on the verses of the Holy Qur'an, which contain symbolic descriptions of Paradise (*jannat*) – the word *jannat* also meaning "garden" in Arabic. Additionally, some Qur'anic verses suggest the existence of four paradises that is also represented by the *Chahar-bagh* design. The four parts of the *Chahar-bagh* symbolize and serve to represent the four rivers of Paradise mentioned in the Qur'anic verses.

[14] Courtyards became a generic typology in hot, arid, climatic landscapes and form the basis of urban pattern in Medinas of the Islamic world. For more information see Lehrman 1980: 32 and Edwards *et al.* 2006: 15.

[15] The Courtyard provides a private, protected space, symbolizing the inner life of individual. In practice it supplies light and cool air to the rooms that form it. Fountain, pool, shade and occasional tree are also a symbolic reflection of Paradise, Lehrman 1980: 31. The courtyard, having been defined by the house itself and by high walls, is an "open to sky" space and is used primarily as an extension of the living quarters, Edwards et al. 2006:15.

[16] During the Safavid period, political power and religious belief joined each other to define an Iranian identity. These three aspects of "identity", "religious belief", and "power" have been manifested in architecture of especially public buildings through "symbols" (Sani 2009).

immigrated from Lebanon and Bahrain to Iran as the only safe and wealthy place for Shi'a Muslims during this period (Sani 2009). The very demonstration of the ideological power of the Safavids is manifested in the grand scale urban projects in the time of Shah Abbas, who chose the city of Isfahan as the new capital. Although, Lockhart stresses that the city "was no creation of his, for it has been a great city long before Shah Abbas reign; it had moreover been at times the capital of the country".[17] Isfahan in the 17th century (AD 1598–1722) projected cosmopolitanism as a Mega city that anchored on the conceptual and functional grandeur of the city (Babaie 2010). The new master plan of Shah Abbas differentiated the new city from the old historical center by organizing the street patterns on orthogonal grids not oriented toward Mecca.[18] The very concept of the city as the imperial capital manifested both ideas of Persian paradise[19] and Islamic Medina in their greatest manifestation. Walcher states that a closer examination of the layout of Isfahan shows the combined principles of Turco-Iranian forms of city and Perso-Islamic and Timurid patterns of garden (Walcher 1998: 331). However, its grandiose architectural design happened in the formation of a unique spatial configuration of Meydan, which was a rectangular space surrounded by bazaars and served as the forecourt to the royal palaces, gardens and mosques and contributed to social and political activities.[20] The new Meydan became the archetype of Iranian spatial apparatus, which the sovereign state communicated to the world (Fig. 4). The Meydan measures 83 000 square meters in area, second only in size to Tiananmen Square[21] in Beijing. Sir Thomas Herbert, a member of the British diplomatic mission of 1628, described the Meydan as "without doubt the most spacious, pleasant and aromatic market in the universe". Moreover,
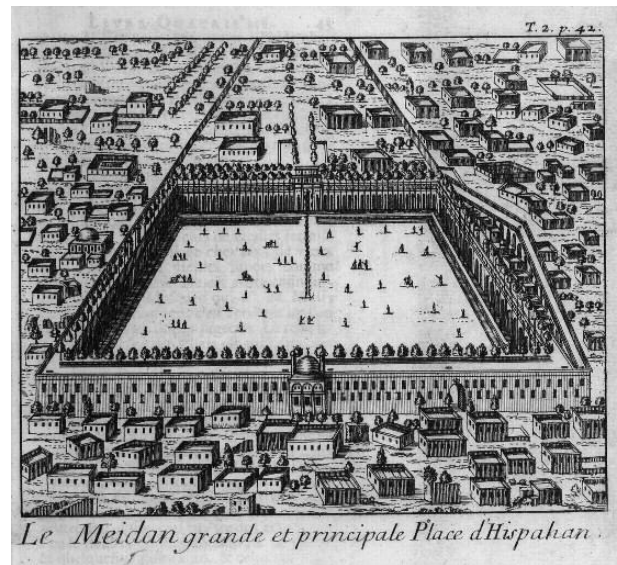

Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Fig. 4. Engraving of the maydan Naghsh-e Jahan in Tavernier. The city square is a positive void in Isfahan

Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France (gallica.bnf.fr)

Meydan creates an alignment with the new promenade called *The Chaharbagh* (1596–1602) and the multi-ethnic, multi-faith sacred sites in south part of the Zayandeh River. The 1.9-kilometer boulevard (*the chaharbagh*) was an impressive urban intervention, which was built as the north south axis of the new capital to connect the new center of the city (*the* Meydân) to the royal quarters over the river. This comprehensive project is comparable to similar urban interventions in Rome by *Pope Sixtus V*, which had been launched just a few years before.[22] The four sides of the Maydan were strategically articulated by the placement of the monumental structures: the royal bazaar (Qaysariyye, begun in 1590/91) on the north side linking the new urban center to the old through its vaulted markets; the Ali Qapu Palace (1590/91–1615) on the west, serving also as the ceremonial entrance into the palace; the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Chapel-Mosque on the east; and the spectacular new congregational mosque (the Royal Mosque, 1611–1638) on the south. Isfahan and the Meydan represented a political impulse to establish an imperial capital that would rival contemporary Constantinople or Agora. Therefore the entire Meydan design can be read as the imprint of a spiritual mapping of Safavid Sovereignty (Babaie 2015). By the seventeenth century, the square and its attached institutions were not only the ceremonial sites of sovereignty, but also the integrated sites of commercial, civic, religious and, political

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[17] The strategic location of Isfahan, abundant water supply and fertile land facilitated the development of Isfahan in the 17th century as Safavid new political capital, (see Walcher 1998: 330; Lockhart 1967: 210–225).

[18] The old city had narrow winding streets and the old Meydan was oriented toward Mecca.

[19] Poets and writers consciously chose the metaphor of paradise to celebrate Isfahan's beauty and extol its pre-eminence as imperial city. As well, Carl Ritter called it "die Paradiesische Stadt" in the early 19th century in *Die Erdkunde von Asien* (Ritter 1938: 21).

[20] The Existence of some historical, cultural, political and geographical features of Naghsh-e Jahan Square in Saheb-Abad and Saadat squares confirmed their common ideological origins. For more Gidion's comments about the entire tradition of spatial modern perspective, and Pope Sixtus V's drawing of Rome, see Tournikiotis 19599: 41.

[21] Mao also dramatically reconfigured Tiananmen Square, turning what had long been a modest T-shaped palace into a vast masonry expanse intended to be able to assemble one million Parties faithful, see Vale 2008: 31.

[22] Herbert compared Isfahan's rise as the symbol of Safavid hegemony with the grandiose supremacy of ancient royal palace cities like Babylon and Persepolis, see Herbert 1638: 153.

interactions. In this layout, the royal compound was connected to the city through the intermediary space of Meydan; this was sustained as a precedent for Iranian cities over the next three centuries.

Squares as locus of power

The very notion of Square as microcosms of urban life and social relations has been transformed dramatically, especially in modern Iran (Mehan 2016b: 246). The traditional patterns of use for public squares were in charge till the modern ages when European patterns of city planning were mixed with the traditional layout of the cities. In Traditional Iranian squares, streets entered the space at its corners, leaving the center free for commercial or social activities. However the streets of Renaissance style, entered the square at the middle of its sides, which accommodated traffic and put a visual emphasis on the central point, where a statue or monument could be placed. Therefore, the design of the square was changing according to the principle of central composition, whereby the entire composition revolved around a central point, which now often marked the glory of absolute power.

In order to understand the concept of power, Foucault's ideas used to explore power, religious beliefs and national identity through symbolism in architecture and urban design. According to Foucault (1980), the success of power and its acceptance depends on its ability to legitimize its existence by use of different sources like hiding behind the religious beliefs, national values or architecture. In this interpretation, the square as a whole reflects the struggle between sources of power, as each source tries to gain control of the society through showing strong appearance in urban space. Public squares are fundamental features of cities, which constitute the main social areas.[23] This expression of power has always been one of the functions of architecture. The way the architecture of a period affects the image of a government through the style of governmental buildings is probably the main way to see how architecture is manipulated by power (Skolimowski 1972)". Vale (1999) argues that "there are business, cultural and governmental elites, which have control over images; these elites need 'official' sorts of architectural monuments to demonstrate their ongoing power and legitimacy" (Vale 1999: 391–408). Milani (2004) describes what exists in the main square of Isfahan, an ancient Persian city that was the capital of the country for a while, as a combination of the main elements of the power in a society. He writes "Naghsh-e Jahan Square at

Isfahan, with its spatial grandeur and name, which means, 'map of the world', was designed according to the King's astute and carefully enforced calculus of power. The trinity of the mosque, the bazaar, and the crown, the three pillars of power and commerce in traditional Iran, dominated its landscape" (Milani 2004).

In this sense, the first modern great square of Tehran, which was named Toopkhaneh, meaning "the Cannon House," was physical evidence of the use of urban design by the ruling power to control the society since it became an urban element of defense against public uprisings and social demonstrations" (Milani 2004). The continuation of the monarchy (palace) and the absolute power of the ruler, the intermediary role of religion (mosque) and economic institutions (bazaar), and the symbolic notions of order and direction have all had direct implications on the urban form of Tehran, even today; the axial form of the city, which caused the segregation of the poor and the rich, derived from the historical segregation of the ruler and the ruled, is the other observable consequence of the power structure on the urban form of Tehran (Madanipour 1998). Milani uses a term that Walter Benjamin had used in The Arcade Project about Paris; he interprets the essence of a famous square in Tehran, which was built as the first touch of the modernity in 19th-century Tehran, as an essence of the use of urban design to prevent social uprisings, and to fight as follows: "There was Toopkhaneh, a square whose military function and ominous name (Cannon House) were reminiscent of what Benjamin calls the 'Haussmannization of Paris', an attempt to use urban

Fig. 5. Drawing Pulling down the statues of Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925–1941) in Sepah Square (currently Imam Khomeini Square, also called Toopkhaneh Square which is literally means Artillery Square), Tehran's main square, 18 August 1953.

Source: The Guardian's Archive

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[23] For more debates on Social Function of historical Public Squares on citizens' Quality of Life, see Mehan 2016c: 1768–1773.

design to fight 'the barricades,' to make the city and the citadel more defensible against a popular uprising" (Milani 2004). According to Mahvash Alemi: "The square reflects the principal ambitious of the court and is a sort of exhibition hall for new acquisitions: the military reform is perceived through the cannons, the decorations and the nearby drill grounds; the technological innovations are to be seen in the use of gas for illumination, the telegraph, and the tramway; the new source of finance, the Imperial Bank of Persia, is the most important building facing the square" (Alemi 1985). From 1949 on, sentiment for nationalization of Iran's oil industry grew and Toopkhaneh square became as one of the most important gathering points for mass rallies and social demonstrations in supporting Iranian Oil Nationalization Movement. During the days leading to 1953 Iranian coup d'état, Toopkhaneh square became the focal point for Anti-Shah political parties meetings and revolutionaries' gatherings and demonstrations like the Toodeh Party demonstrations in Toopkhaneh Square. In 1979, a few days after the Islamic Revolution of Iran, Iranian Pulls down statue of Reza Shah Pahlavi in Toopkhaneh Square after his son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi leaves the country. This symbolic fell down of statue as well as the change in square's name (From Sepah to Imam Khomeini Square) brought a new chapter in political life of the square (Fig. 5).

Escape from squares

There are some research related to the urban transition in Iran; which all are unanimous that modern movement destroyed heritage urban textures in many of Iranian cities. However, there are few references on the urban transition and evolution process of Iranian public spaces (see Mehan 2016b; Keddie, Richard 2003). By formation of Qajar government in 1786, Iran experienced a new period of global history, social, economic and cultural changes. In the beginning of Qajar dynasty in 18th century, urbanism in Iran was not much different with Safavid era, the bazaar and square were still the backbone of the city, and other urban spaces like mosque, square, and school were its inseparable spaces. Social interactions still took place mainly in bazaar as a place for refreshments, rest, and exchange of news; actually, it was considered as the focal point of public life as well as center of social, cultural, recreational, religious and political activities. But by the end of Qajar dynasty in 19th century, which coincides with industrial revolution period in Europe, the urban planning in Iran encountered many changes. The most important and significant element of change was the advent of car into urban spaces, which

led to establishment of some long and wide streets in heritage urban texture (Kheirabadi 2000).

In the process of Modernization, most of squares bearing little resemblance to their earlier counterparts. The new squares were neither the naturally evolved spaces of tradition nor primarily open-ended centers of activity for people. They were symbols of axial planning in the Western sense, visual nodes and keys to the city's image. Within the urban grid, they became Le Corbusier's "apparatus for circulation". These large and symmetrical public squares and circles were planned as grand, monumental focal points of the city (Mehan 2017). Some of the most important characteristics of public squares in this era are; paying attention to physical aspects of square façades, inspiring from western urbanism and architecture style, continuity in form, advent of automobiles in urban spaces, locating at the intersections of main streets, regular geometric shape especially rectangular and circular form, and paying attention to details in façade of squares (Savadkouhifar 1999).

In the latter half of the 20th century the pressure for industrialization in Iran created new concerns. The acceleration of urban growth and modernization programs under the aegis of the White Revolution, the Shah's 1960 land reform and industrialization program, along with other factors such as emergence of new approaches to urban planning and impacts of information technologies, religion was a key factor that having special influence on urban planning of Iran (Hamidi *et al.* 1997). In 20th century, the modern squares transformed to traffic intersections or boring parking lots which people pass their time without any enthusiasm (Mehan 2016a).

Insurgent squares

Square is important for the expression of democratic rights and claims in modern democracy. In Hebermas's account, the ideal public square is universally deemed and spatially undifferentiated. Hebermas argues that public space is a discursive space for citizen debate, deliberation, agreement, and negotiation (Low, Smith 2006: 17–34). In contemporary Middle Eastern experience, the rise to prominence of space of Tahrir Square (Midan Tahrir) in Cairo since the Egyptian revolution in January 2011 has cast new light on the significance of insurgent urban spaces. Indeed, even the late twentiwth and early twenty-first centuries events in Iran, demonstrate public actions in major public squares: the 1978 beginnings of the Iranian reveloution starts around a series of bloody encounters at the Maydan-e Jaleh in Tehran; followed by anti-Shah protests in 1979, as well as the uprisins of 2009, took place at the famous

Fig. 6. Revolutionaries gathered at a massive demonstration in Tehran on Feb.8, 1979. (npr.org 2009)

Shahyad (now Azadi/Freedom) square. Leach highlights the crucial role of social ground of architectural form when removed from its contextual situation. He argues that "Monumental Architecture achieves its political status through semantic association depends on an historical memory within the collective imagination. Once this memory fades, the building may be appropriated based on new ideological imperatives" (Leach 2004: 118–120). The utility of these contemporary squares as the place of encounter with the ruling power in the modern era are demonstrably related to the historic relation of the idea of Meydan (Maydan or Midan) in Islamic cities. The Shahyad (now Freedom) monumental square associated with various political positions, which is depended upon the collective memory and public imagination. What was happened in this iconic Square of Tehran was the prolonged and mass occupation of public squares by citizens that represented the public square as the archetypal "center stage" upon which collective action is symbolically meaningful (Fig. 6). The square became widely known as Freedom (in Persian language: Azadi) Square after the 1978 Iranian Islamic revolution and officially renamed after the 1978 Iranian Islamic revolution. By its ordering role as the spatial center of the nation and by its name, this space was important in the production of modern citizenship.

Conclusions

This research explores the political foundations of the square. It positions itself around *Rolan Barthes* theory of representing the squares as the political orders in the ideogram of the city. Based on Michael Webb's definition, this study proposes the city as a place formed by politics and the square as the *blank slate* on which sovereign and people had the oppurtunity to write.

Subsequently, the paper suggests a dialectic reading of the idea of representing the city as a place formed by the central concept of *Meydan* (Public Square), as core of the projects in the city, which historically exposed in formalization of theological ideology. Therefore, here, the concern is issue of continuity; a specific conception of space which has remained constant despite through the time: reading the city as series of "Blank Slates". Therefore, here, the concern is issue of continuity; a specific conception of space which has remained constant despite through the time.

As the embodiment of the square in the image of the city, the historical, social and theological concept of Meydan – a term, which has mostly applied, for Iranian and Islamic public squares is investigated. Regarding this issue, urban space of traditional Islamic cities introduced as the medium through which theological ideologies and political sovereignty took place. To connect basic thoughts, ideologies, foundations and frameworks in urban history of Iranian square, the most predominant concepts of squares in shaping the idea of the city represented. The predominant politico-religious foundations of traditional Iranian squares as "space of sovereignty" and "courtyard of the city" focuses on the impact of power, religious beliefs and symbolism on the ideal concept of square. Through the intermediary space of "square as political locus of sovereignty", the royal compound was connected to the city. The theological idea of a central empty space – *Blank Slate* – implied explicitly in squares that should be seen as "uncovered rooms of the city". In addition, the particular reading of square as "courtyards of the city" provokes a spatial archetype: the Paradise. In this sense, paradise is strongly associated with the idea of square as "Blank Slate".

By considering the modern foundations for power relations, and their impact on urban form, this article focuses on the transitional history and urban evolution of Iranian public squares through the modern foundation till the contemporary era. Therefore, the design of the square was revolved around a central point, which now often marked the glory of absolute power. In this interpretation, the square as a whole reflects the struggle between sources of power, as each source tries to gain control of the society through showing strong appearance in urban space. In contemporary Middle Eastern experience, the rise to prominence of Shahyad Square (Now Freedom Square) in Tehran since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 has cast new light on the significance of insurgent urban spaces. It can be concluded that the efficacy of Shahyad Square as a prominent example of monumental architecture, compromised to support the change in political system.

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