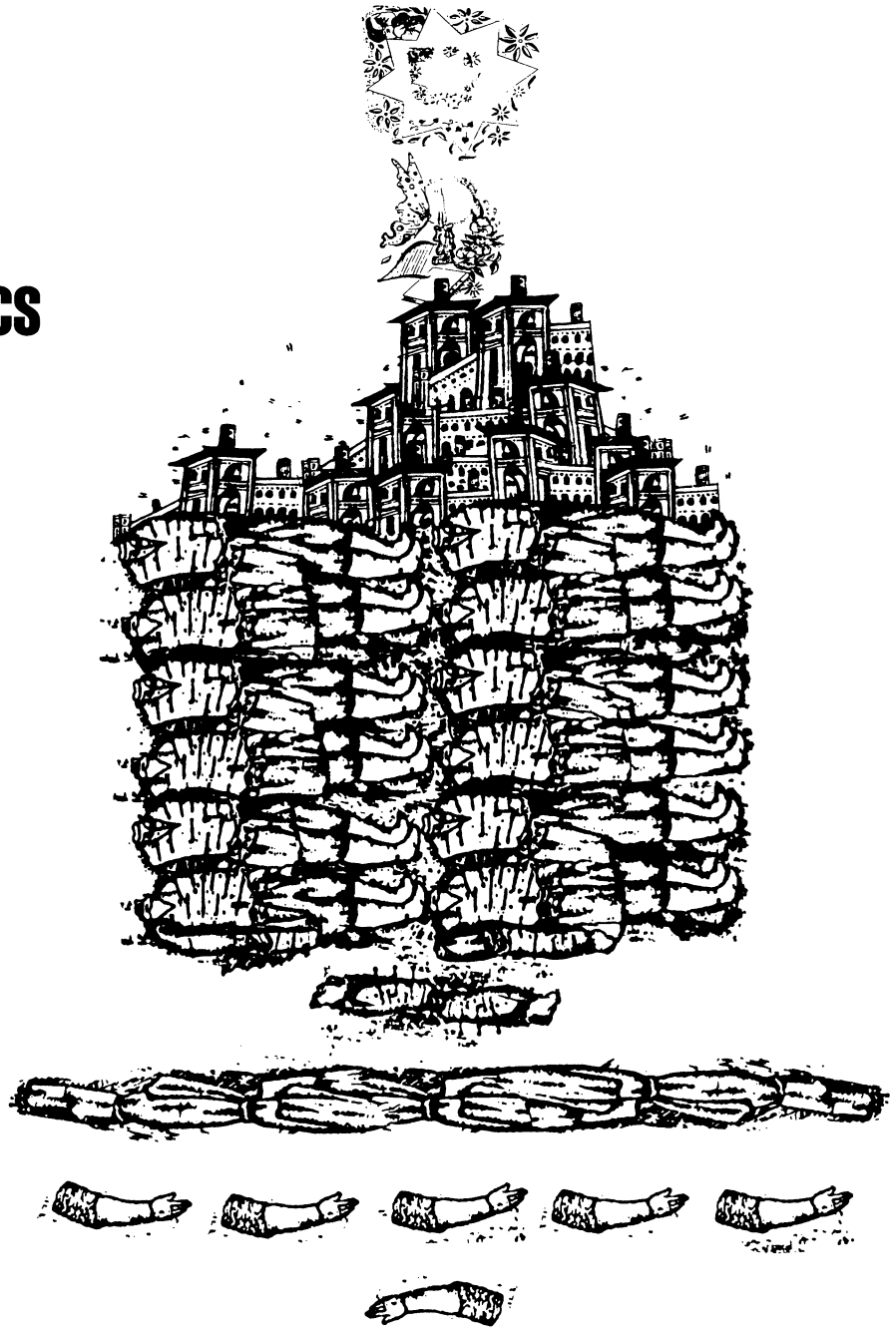
Squatters and the State

Back Street Politics in the Islamic Republic

Asef Bayat

Recent large-scale urban unrest in Iran represents the noisy surface of a movement, largely silent throughout the 1980s, in the back streets of poor communities, among the disenfranchised who lack institutional mechanisms to express demands and grievances.



The Future Belongs to Us

Ardeshir Mohassess/*Closed Circuit History*

The early 1990s saw a period of renewed urban popular uprisings in Iran, unprecedented since the 1979 revolution. From August 1991 to August 1994, six major upheavals took place in Tehran, Shiraz, Arak, Mashhad, Ghazvin and Tabriz, and there were frequent minor clashes in many other urban centers. Most of these incidents involved urban squatters concerned with the destruction in their communities. This was the case in Tehran, Shiraz, Arak, Mashhad and Khoramabad.

The sequence of urban insurrections began in August 1991, when squatters in the south Tehran district of Bagher Abad rioted against the municipal agents who had begun demolishing their illegal shacks. The protesters stoned police and set the municipality cars on fire.[1] In March 1992, some 300 disabled war veterans in Tehran staged street protests against mismanagement at the state-run Foundation of the Oppressed. They were immediately joined by squatters protesting their forced eviction from their illegally-built homes. The protesters went on a rampage of looting and torched city buses, banks and police stations. Two protesters and six police were killed, many were injured, 300 were arrested and four were subsequently executed by the government.[2] Riots in the industrial city of Arak, 240 kilometers southwest of Tehran, lasted for two days and led to "hundreds" of arrests. The riots broke out when a dump truck being chased by a municipal vehicle struck and killed a young boy. The following day "up to 3,000 people marched on the city center chanting 'Down

with the mayor,' setting fire to several bank branches and three city buildings."[3] The city remained under martial law for several days.

The most dramatic of these events took place in Mashhad, a holy city of 3 million people lying close to the Afghanistan border. Disturbances there on May 30, 1992, began in Kouy-e Tollab, a squatter area, where the city government had refused to grant construction permits for already-built dwellings. When the neighborhood representatives returned home empty-handed from the municipal office, they encountered demolition squads and security forces with trucks and bulldozers. Many resisted by assaulting the officers. Others refused to leave their homes. A lull in the skirmishes ended when school children returned home from classes. The crowd grew larger, and in the ensuing clashes with security forces two young boys were shot dead. The indignant rioters then "went on an orgy of looting and arson," and torched the city hall, the library and several police stations. By evening, the rioters had reportedly taken over the city. When the army could not suppress the crowds, the central government dispatched *basij* (volunteer militia) units.[4] Eight masked gunmen reportedly led the looting and attacks on the government buildings.[5]

In the end, the Mashhad riot had destroyed over one hundred buildings and stores, and left an estimated total damage of IR 10 billion. More than 300 people were arrested, six police officers killed and four rioters hanged. Officials blamed the "religious hard-liners ousted from the parliament," "foreigners," "opportunists" and the Mujahidin.[6]

Other riots involved a broader social base, with more people mobilized around larger social, economic and political issues. Information about the August 1994 disturbances in Ghazvin and Tabriz is still very scanty. *Al-Hayat* reported that the riots in the industrial city of Ghazvin, 150 kilometers northwest of Tehran, were triggered on August 9, 1994, when the Majlis rejected a demand for administrative autonomy. During the four days of riots, 38 people were killed and about 400 injured. As the Revolutionary Guards and the army were reluctant to intervene, *basij* forces were dispatched to calm the city. Some 10 days later, "thousands" of people in Tabriz, Iran's third largest city, rioted. According to *Al-Hayat*, the disturbances began when some members of *basij* objected to the behavior of a group of young boys and girls who gathered together in public after a soccer match. Thousands of demonstrators attacked the government buildings, set cars and buses on fire, and fought against Revolutionary Guards and *basij*.[7]

Apart from this large scale unrest, many minor clashes have passed unnoticed abroad. These urban riots, in particular those initiated by the urban poor, are not extraordinary political events, but rather a corollary to the everyday politics of ordinary people in their struggle to survive and improve their lots. Nor do they point to a new phase in popular mobilization. Rather, they represent the noisy surface of a largely silent movement present throughout the 1980s in the back streets of poor urban communities, among the many disenfranchised who lack meaningful institutional mechanisms to make demands and express grievances.

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Squatters and the Revolutionary State

For at least three decades, rural migrants and slum dwellers searching for ways to survive and improve their lives have colonized lands in and outside the big Iranian cities. Silently, away from the eyes of the authorities, they build shelters, organize communities, and acquire amenities such as piped water and electricity, more often than not by unlawful means. This mostly discrete and individual direct action allowed these people to escape the burdens of high rent and state control, and to form communities where government interference took a back seat to family, kinship and local norms. Such cumulative processes eventually reached a stage which surpassed government tolerance. Almost every government assault was met by collective resistance and popular unrest. This phenomenon occurs in many other developing countries. What is perhaps unique about the Iranian case is the official discourse in rhetorical support of the disinherited, the *mustazafin*, of whom the *koukhnishinan*, or the shanty dwellers, constitute the central segment.

Squatting around large cities began long before the Islamic revolution. There were major confrontations between police and squatters during the summer and autumn of 1977. During the revolution, many needy, as well as greedy, took advantage of the power vacuum and divided plots of unused urban land among themselves. Following the insurrection of February 1979, land takeovers in the cities continued in earnest, as did the occupation of homes and hotels. But the supply of vacant usurpable apartments was limited, and the legal complications involved in appropriating built property rendered squatting a more viable strategy.

The greatest squatter activity has been in Tehran. The number of shanty dwellers increased manyfold following the revolution. The shanty settlements (*zageh*) of Zanjan-i Jonoubi Street grew by 140 percent during 1980 and those of Soleimanieh, Resalat Highway, Zanjan-i Shomali Street and Tajrish almost doubled. Spontaneous new communities arose in Meydan-i Azadi and in south Tehran.[8] The total population of the Gowdnishinan and shanty dwellers within the capital city reached some 100,000 households by the early 1980s.

Spontaneous settlements expanded even more outside the city limits, where thousands acquired land, legally or illegally, to construct homes of mud or bricks. Large areas of spontaneous construction emerged around Shahr-i Rey, Varamin and Nizam Abad in the southern plain of the capital city, and Khak-i Sefid in Tehran Pars. Informal townships sprang up beyond the city limits in Shahrak-i Mamazan, Shahrak-i Ghiam, Kianshahr, Sharak-i Ghal'e

Hasan Khan, Shad-shahr, Rajaii-shahr and Gherchak. By 1986, more than 20 settlements had mushroomed around the capital city within range of the city bus service. These settlements had a population of well over 460,000, six times their size in 1976.[9]

Rural communities on the margins of the city began to house the urban poor. These new urban villages, or village-like urban settlements, provided cheaper land for home construction, less crowding, cheaper goods and services, and more autonomy from urban regulations. Here agriculture accounted only for a minor activity, and the inhabitants—mainly migrants from other rural areas and from Tehran's inner city—depended on the economy of the urban center. Bagher Abad, where rioting occurred in 1991, was such a place.

By the end of the 1980s, the total number of these new *shahrak* (township) communities reached 100 within and around greater Tehran.[10] "The land area of Tehran has rapidly expanded from 200 square kilometers in the first year of the Revolution to 600 square kilometers at the present," Tehran's mayor admitted bitterly. "This rapid expansion has, for the most part, been devoid of any order and legal procedures. Much of the construction work has been *gachaghi* [underground], carried out in the middle of the night. Homes have been turned into shops, and many buildings have been built on public thoroughfares and public spaces."[11]

Tehran was not alone in squatter colonization. *Hashiyenishini* (squatter settlements) also mushroomed around Mashhad, Tabriz, Shiraz, Karadj, Bakhtaran, Arak and Hamadan, to name only a few. In Mashhad, the number of *hashiyenishinan* (squatters) reached some 500,000. Between 1980 and 1983, the land area of the city of Bakhtaran, in the west, grew from 6 square kilometers to about 80 square kilometers. In 1984, the mayors of Tabriz and Uroumieh in the north warned about the threat of *hashiyenishini* and illegal over-night constructions, and called for measures to halt the trend. By the end of the 1980s, the *hashiyenishini* had spread even to small and medium-size towns.[12]

Expansion Factors

The rapid expansion of informal settlements was fueled by a growing population's need for places to live, a shortage and maldistribution of urban housing, and a desire for an autonomous life free of state regulations and landlords. Undoubtedly the Islamic government inherited a good portion of the problem from the previous regime, but in the early revolutionary years the situation further deteriorated. It was estimated that during the 1970s, 200,000 new homes a year were needed. This number jumped to 300,000 by 1983.[13] While housing needs increased following the revolution, private investment in housing almost totally collapsed. The total number of homes built in 1982 (just over 11,600) was one-tenth of that in 1979 (some 160,000).[14] According to Chief Justice Ayatollah Moussavi-Ardabili, there were over 200,000 "homeless families" in the capital city alone.[15]

Between 1976 and 1986, the urban population grew by about 72 percent, at an annual rate of 5.5 percent (from 15,715,000 to 26,991,000). Three factors contributed to this. First was the influx of 2.5 million Iran-Iraq war refugees, many of whom had to live in makeshift shelters and temporary tents in major urban areas. In addition, by the mid-1980s an estimated 2 million Afghan refugees poured into the country; many were relocated in big cities such as Mashhad and Zahedan. An estimated 120,000 to 300,000 Afghanis took up residence in Tehran. Rural-urban migration played the biggest role. From 1976 to 1986, over 2,225,000 rural people left their homes to live and work in the cities. About 1.5 million migrated to the greater Tehran area.[16]

Early migrants rushed to the big cities, anticipating the revolutionary fruits of free housing, jobs and high income. Later migrants were largely pushed out of rural areas by economic necessity, when the enthusiasm of the Islamic leaders for agriculture and rural development did not manage to halt the deterioration of living conditions in the countryside.[17] While the Construction Crusade Organization (CCO) carried out many development projects, particularly road construction and electricity supply, poor farmers' income from agriculture remained sluggish. In 1982, a rural household earned only 44 percent of an urban family. A 1984 survey by the CCO on migration in Hamadan and Isfahan provinces showed that over 85 percent of the poor migrants had left their villages because of low income, inadequate land and lack of irrigation water.[18]

For squatters, the next step after illegal construction is the struggle to attain urban services, legal or otherwise. In the new squatter communities, electricity was either non-existent or had to be purchased from small generators which richer owners installed in some communities to generate an income. Drinking water had to be obtained either from outdoor fountains or from the elevated ad-hoc reservoirs which the residents had connected to their homes through plastic hoses. By the end of 1980, some 48,000 households remained without piped water and 18,800 were without electricity in Tehran alone. By 1986, the number of families without running water in the urban areas of Tehran province was twice that six years earlier.[19]

Many migrants publicized their needs through petitions and open letters to the authorities in the daily papers. They also took to the streets in demonstrations and sit-ins in front of local and federal government offices. The women of Zoor Abad, in Karadj, campaigned from 1980 to 1982 to get running water, a public bath house and garbage collection services. In 1984, in Arak, an industrial town in the central province, hundreds of squatters from Zoor Abad marched on the town hall to demand piped water. Similar mobilizations were organized by the women of Mehdieh community in South Tehran, Shahrak-i Fardis in Karadj and around many other large cities.

When raucous demonstrations proved insufficient, the squatters adopted discrete direct actions. Households began, individually and collectively, to connect their homes to the water pipes on the main streets, or to electrical wires

which passed above their communities. In 1987, a study of some 5,000 shanties and some 8,000 families in seven Tehran districts concluded that the majority of the settlements utilized illegal running water and electricity, in some cases with the agreement of the city government.[20]

Government Response

Early official responses to squatter actions were characterized by competition, confusion and contradiction. After the revolution, their mobilization had become the subject of rivalry among some 20 official and unofficial groups working in poor neighborhoods. The ruling clergy, seeking a solid social base, made the *mustazafin* the champion of the struggle for the Islamic revolution. Within this broad category, the *koukhnishinan* (shanty dwellers) acquired a central position. To the dismay of then-Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, the Ayatollah Khomeini declared only a few days after the revolution that "No one must remain without a dwelling in this country," and that water and electricity should be supplied free to the poor. Bazargan, along with President Abol Hassan Banisadr and Tehran's Mayor Mohammed Tavassoli, fearing that such statements would unleash uncontrollable migration and urban disorder, called instead for rural development, agricultural improvement and selective upgrading of existing poor urban neighborhoods. In 1980, the Revolutionary Council discussed, without result, ways to repatriate some shanty dwellers back to the countryside.

The office for the Housing of the Dispossessed (*Daftarkhanehsazi bara-ye mustazafin*), headed by Hassan Karrubi, a self-declared defender of the poor, along with the Housing Foundation of Ayatollah Khosrowshahi, opted for a radical seizure and allocations of homes and land among the homeless. Leftist groups supported these measures. The armed followers of Karrubi and Khosrowshahi identified homes, hotels and land for takeover and allocation among the homeless, as well as many of their own associates.[21] Karrubi extended some IR 200 million (US $2.8 million) in loans to the homeless and the small businessmen within two years.[22] Upon the invitation of the Housing Foundation, more than 800,000 people sent applications to receive land or housing in 1980 alone. The Foundation claims to have granted about 100,000 plots of land and 2,500 homes, most of them in rural areas.[23]

Adapted from the Library of Congress, *Iran: A Country Study.*

The Revolutionary Guards opposed the confiscations, and instead advocated upgrading poor neighborhoods. Yet they prevented volunteer groups from initiating such activities in poor neighborhoods.[24] This rivalry had significant implications for the housing sector. It encouraged the poor to make demands and further legitimized their direct actions. Some opportunistic and well-to-do developers joined the *mustazafin* bandwagon to usurp properties. At the time when some officials encouraged repatriation for migrants and others offered them land and homes, the Revolutionary Guards continued attacking those who directly resorted to squatting. This confusion led to a virtual collapse of private investment in housing. Troubles eased slightly in June 1980, when these Robin Hood activities were brought to an end: Hassan Karrubi's office was abolished and Ayatollah Khosrowshahi was sent off to be ambassador to the Vatican.[25]

With the fall of the "housing radicals," the government brought some legal and administrative order to the sector with the promulgation of an urban land law. At the same time, the Revolutionary Council nationalized and thus took control of *mawwat* (unused) and later *bayer* (previously used) urban lands.[26] Nevertheless, the government never formulated a consistent policy with regard to hous-

ing for the poor. Throughout the 1980s, prevailing "policy" combined four different strategies: selective housing provision, halting rural migration, demolishing illegal structures, and tolerating the same.

The government supply of urban housing relative to demand has been limited. The Housing Foundation, set up largely by private donors in April 1979 in response to Ayatollah Khomeini's decree, continued to function with the aim of providing housing for the poor. But after the Iran-Iraq war the bulk of its activities were directed to war reconstruction and its function was limited to promoting self-help housing through interest-free loans, provision of materials and technical assistance.[27]

Some large city municipalities have cleared slums and relocated residents to more decent dwellings or offered aid and loans to build their own homes. Some of the communities, such as the notorious settlements in south Tehran, have had symbolic significance among officials as the embodiment of *istiz'af* (poverty and misery), and are thus incompatible with the self-image of the government of the dispossessed.

The flow of rural poor to the cities in search of a better life has diluted the effects of these piecemeal measures. Urban migration remains a major problem although the regime seems to have succeeded in reducing the overall fertility rate.[28] Most officials agree that the government needs to halt this population drift, and that the key to this is rural improvement. Migration, "this social catastrophe," in the words of Mayor Habibi of Tehran, has become "a major threat to the revolution and the Islamic Republic."[29] Beyond a discursive shift, some concrete measures were devised. The Mosque Associations, government-sponsored neighborhood councils, were instructed to deny food ration cards to migrant families. The government also attempted to restrict migrant purchases of homes and land.

These measures had little impact, precisely because of the informal and autonomous way in which the poor tend to operate and subsist. For the poor, informality—in the sense of autonomy from the state institutions and regulations—serves not only as a means of survival and livelihood but is an end in itself. This propensity for autonomy accounted for a major source of conflict between the authorities and the poor.

Given these circumstances, few options remain. One is to formalize and integrate illegal communities by recognizing their status and extending urban services. Some marginal neighborhoods in Tehran gained such status when the government was forced to change the city boundaries. From the vantage point of the authorities, the purpose was to insure popular support and the state control, and to secure payment for services which otherwise would be tapped "informally." But this strategy could foster further migration, in addition to requiring massive infrastructural facilities and urban reorganization.

A second option, demolition, has been implemented selectively since 1980. In Tehran, illegal dwellings in Dashtak, Pol-i Mudiriyyat, Shahrak-i Mamazan, Shahrak-i Qiam, Shahrak-i Karoun, Shahraki Kianshahr, Qal'eh Morghi, Shadshahr, Qal'eh Hasssankhan, Nizamabad, Varamin and Khakisafid and numerous other neighborhoods were attacked by the Revolutionary Guards or the city's special demolition squads. The settlements were put under daily surveillance by the security forces to make sure that no new shelters were built. Most of these attacks met with collective resistance, and some with street riots. The urban riots of the early 1990s were of this nature. Even if the clearance of a squatter area is successful, it only tends to drive people from the inner city slums to different, more distant spots.

Tolerating informal communities without granting legal recognition has been the dominant state policy. The silent movement of the poor in the back streets of their insecure communities seems to continue. The dispossessed may eventually ask for permits, piped water, electricity, roads and schools. More likely, they will acquire them "informally." When these captured gains are threatened the silent movement of the back streets tends to turn into open and highly audible street unrest. ■

Footnotes

1 *New York Times*, August 14, 1991; *Arbar*, August 1991.

2 *New York Times*, June 12, 1992.

3 *Middle East Times*, June 2-8, 1992.

4 *The Economist*, June 6 and 13, 1992.

5 *Bulletin-i Khabari Aghazi Nou*, 24 Khordad 1371.

6 *Jomhuri-ve Islami*, 12 Khordad 1371; *Abrar*, Khordad 1371; *Ettelaat*, 11 Khordad 1371.

7 *Al-Hayat*, August 22, 1994.

8 *Ingilab-i Eslami*, 22 Esfand 1358, p. 6.

9 *Ettelatt-i Siassi va Iqtisadi*, 17, Esfand 1366, p.44.

10 *Majalle-ye Me'marri va Shahrsazi*, editorial, 8, 1369, p. 4.

11 *Hamshahri*, 7 Dey 1371. Urban planners estimate of the land area of Tehran to have stretched to 850 square kilometers by 1990; *Majalle-ye Me'marri va Shahrsazi*, editorial, 8, Morded 1369, p. 4.

12 See Asef Bayat, *Street Politics in Iran* (forthcoming).

13 *Middle East Economic Digest (MEED)*, April 1, 1983, p. 14; *Ettelaat*, 11 Esfand 1363, "The Resignation of the Director of the Housing Foundation and the Housing Problem."

14 See Bayat, forthcoming in *Street Politics*.

15 *MEED*, February 11, 1983. In 1979, according to the Minister of Housing, on average, for every 1,000 people there were only 117 homes (*Ayandegan*, 6 Ordibehesht 1358).

16 See F. Kazemi and L. R. Wolf, "Urbanization, Migration, and Politics of Protest in Iran," in M. Bonine, ed., *Middle East Cities in Crisis* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, forthcoming), pp. 23-24.

17 Asghar Schirazi, *The Problem of Land Reform in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Complications and Consequences of an Islamic Reform Policy* (Free University of Berlin, 1987).

18 In the province of Isfahan the survey covered 15 towns where "lower income" accounted for 49.5 percent of the migration, water and land 35 percent, better urban services 11 percent, and conflicts with nomadic chiefs 4 percent. In Hamadan low income accounted for 77 percent, land 18.4 percent, water 17.1 percent and poor rural welfare 18.4 percent. (The total comes to more than 100 because some reasons mentioned are given more than once.) See Majilis debates on the report of the Jihad-i Sazandegi, in Bayat (forthcoming).

19 Ministry of Budget and Planning, *Census of Households and Housing, 1365 (Ostan Tehran)* and *(The Country at Large)* (Tehran: Statistical Center, 1988); Planning and Budget Organization, *Census of Tehran, 1359* (Tehran: Statistical Center, 1981).

20 Parviz Piran, "Zaghehnishini dar Tehran" (Shanty Dwelling in Tehran), *Ettelaat Siyassi-Igtisadi* (1987), 17-22.

21 Interview with a participant in the takeovers, Sweden, October 1993.

22 *Ettelaat*, 24 Dey 1358.

23 "Bilan-i Kar-i Bonyad-i Maskan," *Ingilab-i Islami*, 7 Ordibehesht 1359.

24 For the debates, see Bayat (forthcoming).

25 *Ettelaat*, 25 Khordad 1359.

26 Ali Kiafar, "Urban Land Policies in Post-Revolutionary Iran" in S. Bina, ed., *Modern Capitalism and Islamic Ideology in Iran* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

27 "An Overview of the Activities of the Housing Foundation in the Past Decade," *Ettelaat*, 20 Farvardin 1369, p.4.

28 See Homa Hoodfar, "Devices and Desires: Population Policy and Gender Roles in the Islamic Republic," *Middle East Report* 190 (September-October 1994).

29 For the official discourse on urban migration see Bayat, forthcoming.