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### INVESTIGATING GEOPOLITICAL FACTORS OF RELIGIOUS CITIES (CASE OF STUDY: MASHHAD CITY)

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#### ABSTRACT

The security and defense approaches of every nation-state in world politics are derived from its perception of the threat posed to it from peripheral and international environment. The perceptions and misunderstandings of governments are the embodiment of their security behaviors and actions in international relations. The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of perception of threat and its effect on dominant Iranian security behavior in the Middle East. Since the victory of the Islamic Revolution, many regional governments have taken an aggressive and non-peaceful approach to the government of Iran and have perceived it as a government disrupting accepted rules of the game and also their internal stability and security. The question is "How the perception of the threat has formed the security behavior and policy of the government of the Islamic republic of Iran after the victory of the Islamic revolution?" The answer to this question, applying the theory of defensive realism, argues that threat perception by the Islamic Republic of Iran has mainly shaped its security and defensive policies in an intrinsic and unilateral threat balance in the Middle East. In this paper, the research methodology is descriptive-analytical and data collection method is library-based.

#### INTRODUCTION

Religion is one of the most important criteria in cities` function. This item is widely considered due to its certain value in terms of geopolitics and metropolitan decision processes. The main factor for the residence in cities having religious functions is the religious beliefs of its individuals; other than their religious functions, these kinds of cities have various political, economic, cultural, and tourism roles.

"The existence of spirituality and religious factors in religious cities can greatly affect the cultural structure of their environment. They can also conquer the cultural structure as desired. Such places not only create

specific spatial patterns of traveling and movement of followings and pilgrims but also pave the ground for economic, social, religious, cultural, political and geopolitical reflects” (Hafeznia, 2006:192).

“Religion has been manifested in the urban fabric and its important components in various forms. It has organized trade exchanges, social organizations, markets, city centers, and villages and has caused the emergence of vital centers of cities” (Saeednia, 2004:4).

Among religious cities of the Muslim World, Mashhad has specific features including several functional and important dimensions, which attracts the attention of millions of tourists annually.

“Mashhad is identified as the second religious metropolitan of the world and is considered as the second metropolitan of Iran. Since the past, due to its location in the center and middle of main international roads, Mashhad has a certain geographical place; even now, due to its specific feature, which is the existence of Imam Reza Holy Shrine, and for its distinguished location in the east part of the country, it has been the social and economic polar. Moreover, it has a significant geographical status, which is considered as the link between the Indian subcontinent and Central Asian countries and Iran” (Mehrabi and Edalatian, 2014)

#### **Statement of the Problem**

“Functional dimension of a city is the same as urban geopolitics from functional view including cognition, exploitation, and protecting geographical sources of power resulting from certain and specific functions of the city and its affecting scope for achieving the purposes of local, national and international relations” (Janparvar, Qorbai Sepehr, Urban Geopolitics, 2017:74).

Mashhad metropolitan is not bound to the religion component in terms of urban geopolitics and its functionalism; although the religion factor is the first factor for the formation of Mashhad, it has had various geopolitical factors and functions during the time due to different conditions and frequent processes.

Therefore, this question arises that what are the geopolitical factors of Mashhad despite the existence of various functional dimensions in this city?

#### **Research Hypothesis**

According to the investigated findings, it seems that the capacities of uptown of Mashhad are highly able to promote its political, religious, economic, and tourism dimensions and seek to enjoy these potential privileges at local, national, and international levels through creating approaches and optimal urban management.

#### **Significance of the Study and Research Purposes**

“One of the national strategies of each country concerning the neighbor and surrounding countries is using cities that are considered as regional poles. These cities have lots of geopolitical advantages and can greatly support the statesmen of every country and specifically reckon on them” (Mehrabi and Edalatian, *ibid*).

The current study sought to investigate various functions of Mashhad from an urban geopolitical viewpoint. On the other hand, it has made an effort to have a deep cognition regarding the capacities and capabilities of Mashhad city from a religious, political, and economic

geopolitics viewpoint so that the important role of Mashhad be manifested in the local, national, regional, and international geographical realms.

### **Methodology**

This study has utilized two documentary and library methods based on analytical-descriptive approaches in relation to the history and current status of Mashhad city. Besides, having focused on the conducted field method, firstly the purposes of the research were explained to the statistical population as well as the experts of the study through designing a questionnaire. Then, the Friedman test and software were used to analyze the target subjects` data one by one so that some firm achievements could be obtained.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

**City:** A city can be considered as a political, social, activity-based, physical, and population-based unit (Jonparvar, *Urban Geopolitics*, 2017:16).

The city is a system composed of physical, population-based, political, economic, social, and cultural data, which is analyzed in an integrated and related form (Farid, Yadollah, 2000).

In more general terms, a city is a set of the integration of natural as well as social factors and environments constructed by human beings in which, minimum certain population resides . (Shiee, 2016:2).

United Nations has identified a city as a place having high population densities in political, managerial, and historical centrality, where the main activity of individuals is not agriculture, rather having urban coordinates that are controlled through governmental- local forces.

Cities are spatial phenomena formed and grown based on geographical context. Besides this geographical context, which is undeniable, it could be stated that a city is the most important form of human being`s social life organization in the space (Jonparvar, Qorbani Sepehr, 2017: 141).

The reality is that during recent decades, most of the scholars have had various views regarding the city; based on their scientific base, these scholars have defined city according to their knowledge, which may be the economy, eastern or countryside society, architecture, or geography, but, a common feature could be observed in all definitions that is human society discussion who have been involved in service and production for solving each other`s needs to be able to meet each other and live together in a residential peaceful coexistence.

**Geopolitics:** Samuel Cohen has identified geopolitics in his book “Geography and Policy” as the following:

“The extract of geopolitics is studying the relationships between international politics, power, and geographical coordinates” (Cohen, Samuel, *Geography and Policy*, 1973).

In another definition: “Geopolitics means studying the way of the relationship between political guidance of a power with international range and geographical framework of its performance” (Galva, 1990).

Geopolitics is a certain approach toward world politics emphasizing the importance of the land and sources (Dodds, 2000:162).

Geopolitics means comprehending the realities of the geographical environment to achieve power so that it could be entered into the global game to protect national sources, and life (Ezzati, 2011:7).

Oxford dictionary defines geopolitics as the following: "Geopolitics is studying the way that policies are affected by geographical factors" (Cowie, 1989:515).

According to Dr. Hafeznia, "Geopolitics is an action which could be explained in the form of an integrated concept having three main components of geography, power, and policy; these components have an intrinsic nature" (Hafeznia, 2008:84). Based on his view, the integration of three components including geography, power, and policy, determine behavioral patterns of human groups toward each other.

**Urban geopolitics:** The exordium of urban geopolitics and its turning point was in 2003. These years, university centers of France, Canada, and Gabon in Africa held international conferences on urban geopolitics; the universities of Gabon, France, and Ottawa of Canada were pioneers in this phase (Khalil Abadi, 2011:75).

It could be stated that urban geopolitics emphasize nature, power, competition, and its reflexes in urban spaces as well as physical, economic, political, and cultural development in various scales of local to spherical levels (Ahmadpour and Mirzaie Tabar, 2014:1).

Urban geopolitics seeks to investigate the virtual disappearance of political forces against the city and its residences from a social point of view (Graham, 2004:24).

That section of geopolitical knowledge which explores urban problems and subjects as well as urban management is considered as urban geopolitics. In other words, urban geopolitics is the applicable and identical aspect of that section of geographical knowledge investigating environmental and human components involved in urban administration system (<http://www.yjc.ir>).

Various components are involved in the structural basis of "urban geopolitics"; two components of "power and competition" are the most important ones leading to the promotion or degradation of cities in terms of the urban system. Most of the studies have related "theoretical foundations of geopolitics" to power whose absolute process can be the emergence of "competition", which talks about urban space structures and urban management.

**Power:** According to Moire, anything that causes the sovereignty of human beings over other human beings and perpetuates it, is called power.

Power has three dimensions: 1. Population, 2. Economy and industry, 3. Military power. Power changes not only in terms of intensity and special concentration but also it may experience fluctuations (Moire, 2000:270).

At any level and dimension, power is affected by other components like geography and policy and mutually affects them in terms of production, application, distribution, and classification (Hafeznia, 2019:38).

Hafeznia believed that "power" is the essence of politics since it enables the politician and political leader to produce its conclusions.

Max Weber identified power as a possibility that is used by the subject and one who has it to impose his will over the other even in case the other resists (Kazemi, 1999:16).

The concept of power is applicable from all perspectives; it covers distribution and production patterns in all geographical elements.

" Accordingly, geopolitical transition involvements, disorders, losses or management weaknesses and inclusive controls over regional or global processes, military violations, unstable coalitions, severe competition of powers claiming the spread of seven domains of influence, the emergence and growth of new actors, imbalance of power, national and international terrorism, local, regional and ethnic identity and other alike are developed" (Mottaqi et al., 2016:31).

**Competition:** Having an overview of "competition" subject among forces in the geopolitical space, it could be stated that "competition" is a dispute or record among two governmental systems or countries in a geographical space beyond their borders in every part of the political world to excel each other (Mojtahedzadeh, 2012:110).

The competition of different governments in their cross-border domain is mostly accompanied by force equilibrium, which follows a global pattern. Most of the time, these competitions convert enmities to peace. It should not be ignored that the competition among great forces, affects conditions, time, place, purports, contracts, sources, and space. Geopolitical competitions mostly cause a sort of force balance, which, according to geopolitical studies, is the best guarantee for peace and stability; it helps to the organization of forces in a hierarchal structure, which is called the: "global system" in geopolitical knowledge (Mojtahedzadeh, *ibid*).

"Despite using evident and hidden as well as dishonest power-based approaches and instruments, geopolitical competition is observable in different domains such as economic patterns, leading to the spread of trading inequalities in the relationship between countries and societies. Colonia patterns, exploitation, international capitalization in poor countries, the globalizing process of the economy and alike are some of these tactics" (Hafeznia, 2016:259).

Overall, it could be mentioned that the triple of center, perimeter, and semi-perimeter describe the competition and power distribution. It is spatial competitions that appear in various regions and times in different forms; one of these forms of competition is promoting political levels of cities and regions (Kaviani Morad, 2007:22).

### **Religious Cities**

First cities were those having governors and rulers with political and religious positions in which, religion dominated policy. Religious beliefs were the main factors that had convinced the residential population of these cities to accept urbanization and the hierarchy, urban structure, and paying taxes accordingly.

The blending process of religion with policy and their effect on the geographical environment has continued in all periods and it continues to the current age.

A review of the urbanism history of the world shows that the religion factor has an important role in the formation and expansion of cities especially old ones (Bahraie and Karegar, 2007:115).

It has been observed in the study of some cities that religious beliefs are the most powerful factor of their existence. These cities are usually emerged around temples and holy mausoleums and slowly convert to a city as the population increases; the samples of such cities are uncountable in the world. In Iran, the best samples of religious cities include Mashhad, Qom, and Shahr-e-Rey that have an Islamic-cultural role.

As a cultural component, religion is the source of change and difference in various lands; religious buildings have an effective role in the formation or development of many cities especially in Iran and other Islamic regions (Nesari et al., 2016:29).

During human history, religious components have been one of the important factors in the type of city formations, where due to the existence of a tomb or holy shrine, all main passages and streets fork as a radial of a center to the surrounding parts.

### **Research Findings**

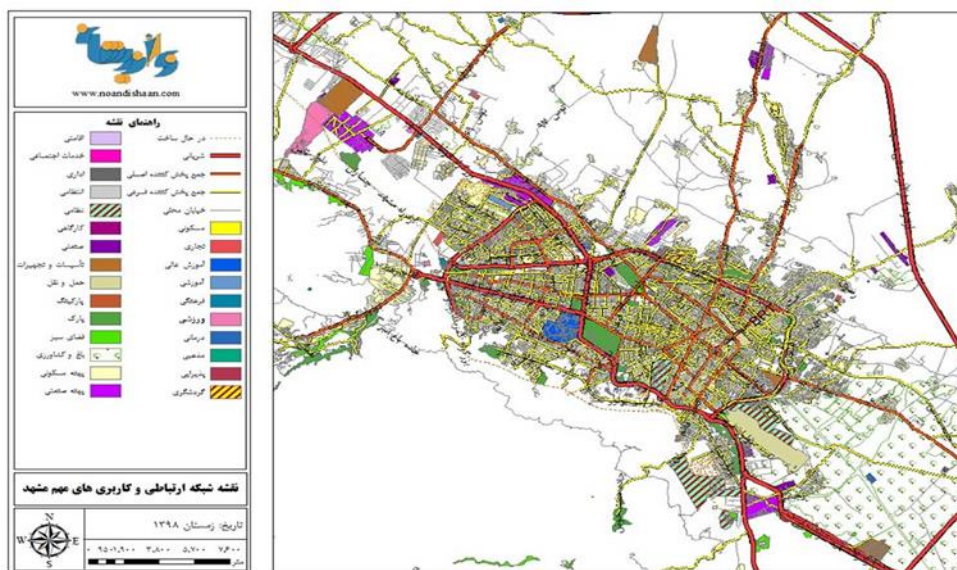
#### **Ecology of Mashhad as a Holy City**

Since the early centuries, Mashhad city was called the Imam Reza shrine and the tomb of God's guardians .

After centuries, the name of Mashhad was gradually added to the historical and geographical texts.

Mashhad is metropolitan in the northeast part of Iran and is the county town of Razavi Khorasan province. This city was the capital of Iran during the Afsharid dynasty. This city has 351 square kilometers area and after Tehran, Mashhad is the second wide city of Iran. According to the National Census of Population and Housing in 2016, having 3,001,184 individuals, Mashhad was the second populous city of Iran after Tehran and it was the 95<sup>th</sup> populous city in the world. Due to the existence of the Imam Reza shrine, the 8<sup>th</sup> Imam of Shia religion, Mashhad annually welcomes more than 27 million pilgrims of Iranian travelers and 2 million pilgrims of foreign countries.

Mashhad city is expanded over Kashafrud river and in Mashhad plain, it has been expanded between Hezar Masjed and Binalud Mountains. The maximum height of Mashhad is 1150 meters and the minimum height is 950 meters. Mashhad has a variable but moderate, cold, and dry weather condition. It has warm and dry summers and cold and wet winters. The maximum temperature is 43 degrees over zero in summers and the minimum temperature is 22 degrees below zero in winters.



Totality map of Mashhad city (various urban layers)

Mashhad has 13 municipality regions and its mayor is selected by 15 members of the city council. This city has an international airport, a railway station, and three terminals, which enable this city to communicate with other cities. Internal transportation of Mashhad takes place through taxi, bus, and urban train systems. The economy of Mashhad is dependent upon religious tourism with an emphasis on the Imam Reza shrine. Besides, the existence of great trading centers as well as significant medical facilities has led to the prosperity of entertainment tourism and health tourism in this city.

Although Mashhad is located in an appropriate place geographically, undoubtedly, in the first step, the existence of the 8<sup>th</sup> Imam Shrine has developed this city significantly. Moreover, its location in traffic roads is the main effective factor for the progress of this city (Seyyedi Farkhond, 2013:29).

Transformation trends of Mashhad history indicate that in the urban history of this city, the role of holy shrines and governments, as well as geographical regions, have had a significant effect on the development and improvement process. The central pole of Mashhad is Imam Reza's holy shrine, which has constructed the form of the city from the center to the surroundings. Due to the centrality of the Shia world, this city has the utmost effect on the expansion of this ideology.

Regarding religion geopolitics, also, it is considered as a superior power in the Islamic and Shia world and has an important role in international and regional transformations. Accordingly, geopolitical factors of Mashhad city such as regional factor (regional functions), political factor (political functions), and economic factor (important economic function) are considered.

#### A. Geopolitical Factor and Religious Function of Mashhad

According to the field method results as well as obtained statistical population findings, it could be inferred that Mashhad city has an important role in the cultural-religious life of the Islamic world and Iran; as the second religious city of Shia world (after Mecca), the influence scope of this role has passed provincial and regional borders. Undoubtedly, the

development of this city is dependent on the existence of the Holy Shrine of Imam Reza and his pilgrims.

**Table 1.** Factors related to religious dimensions of geopolitical factors

	The mean score	Priority
1. Imam Reza shrine as one of the places considered by world Shia	4.09	1
2. Mashhad as a place for the settlement of country seminaries	3.02	2
3. The role of Mashhad seminaries on affecting world Shia	2.41	5
4. The role of Mashhad religious places in religious interaction with Shia countries of the region	2.70	4
5. The role of Mashhad in expanding Shia religion and religious beliefs	2.79	3

The result of the Friedman test indicated that the holy shrine as one of the places considered by the world Shia, Mashhad as a place of seminary settlements, and the role of Mashhad in expanding Shia religion and religious beliefs had respectively the highest priorities. In other words, among factors related to religious dimensions of geopolitical factors of Mashhad religious places, Imam Reza shrine as one of the places considered by world Shia, Mashhad as a place of seminary settlements, and the role of Mashhad in expanding Shia religion and religious beliefs had the most important roles compared to others.

**Table 2.** Factors of geopolitical factors

	The mean score	Priorities
Political dimension	1.48	3
Economic dimension	2.03	2
Religious dimension	2.49	1

The result of the Friedman test showed that religious, economic, and political dimensions, respectively, had the highest priorities. In other words, among geopolitical factors of religious places, Mashhad's religious, economic, and political dimensions had more roles than other factors.

According to the Imam Reza shrine information database, explaining the purposes and strategies of the 20-Year Perspective Document of this shrine was as the following: Imam Reza shrine now welcomes almost 20 million pilgrims annually; in Imam Reza Perspective Document, the annual statistics of pilgrims reach almost 40 million individuals.



Every year, more than one million foreign pilgrims of one hundred countries come to Mashhad to visit the Imam Reza shrine; some of them come from 27 foreign cities and use direct flights. However, most of the foreign pilgrims are unaware of the capacities and capabilities of religious metropolitans of the world regarding various cases. Mashhad is the second religious metropolitan in the world, but, the share it has gained till now from foreign pilgrims is not comparable with the existing capabilities.

The head of foreign pilgrims of Imam Reza shrine has stated that Imam Reza city is favored by all Shia people. He also declared that: Even people other than Shia are interested in Imam Reza and travel Mashhad to visit him. Nowadays, pilgrims travel to Mashhad from more than 120 countries in the world.

**Table 3.** The role of Mashhad in expanding Shia and religious beliefs

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very low	2	2.0	2.0	2.0
	Low	10	10.0	10.0	12.0
	Moderate	17	17.0	17.0	29.0
	High	38	38.0	38.0	67.0
	Very high	33	33.0	33.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

The results of collected research questionnaires showed that the role of Mashhad in expanding Shia religion and religious beliefs is high. In terms of scientific and educational dimensions, Iran has established different universities and scientific as well as religious centers in the country and foreign countries so that the ground for foreign Shia students` education could be provided. The establishment and development of centers such as Al-Mustafa international university, Ahlul Bayt international university, Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute, University of Religions and Denominations, Al Zahra cooperative society, Islamic school of Narjes are justifiable and could be evaluated in this regard. The name of these centers reflects religious and international aspects of them to a great extent.

Imam Reza shrine is one of the religious institutions that have been the center of attention of benefactors who have devoted all or some of their assets.

The geography of Mashhad with the centrality of Imam Reza shrine not only has a national function but also has international and global functions. This issue clarifies the concept of Shia geopolitics` power. The subject of Mashhad's influence, jurisdiction, and Shia power has a historical root whose expansion is really wide and is old enough since the past.

The role of the Imam Reza shrine is clear in embossing the religious geopolitics of Mashhad since the past. The existence of cultural activities, publications, set of precious books, and museums has added to the religious function value of this city. Imam Reza shrine is one of the important religious institutions that have been considered by benefactors during the history to now and house and wealth benefactors have devoted most of their buildings and trading as well as economic centers to this place which have caused this place to be powerful in terms of economy.

**B. Geopolitical Factor and Political Function of Mashhad City**

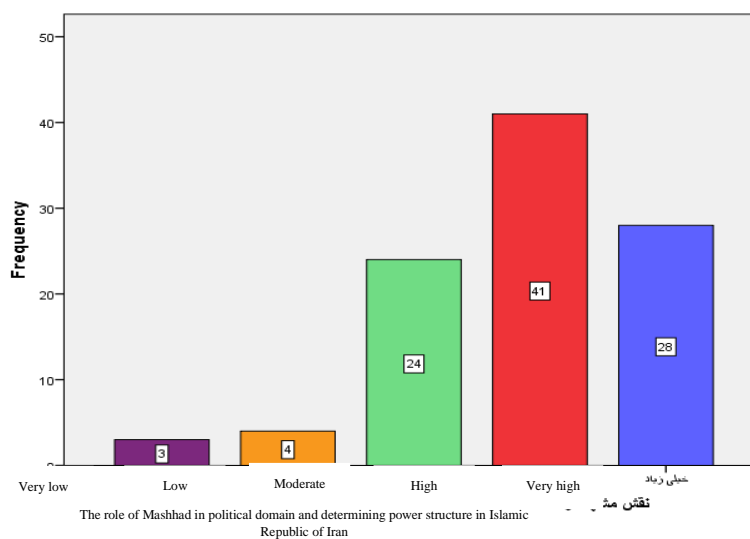
According to the obtained statistical analysis, prioritizing factors related to the political dimensions of Mashhad is highlighted.

**Table 4.** Factors related to the political dimensions of geopolitical Factor

	Mean score	Priority
1. The role of Mashhad in the political domain and determining power structure in the Islamic Republic of Iran	10.20	4
2. The role of popular characteristics of Mashhad in the main elements of the Islamic Republic of Iran system	10.51	1
3. The political role of Mashhad in determining leadership	8.49	5
4. Political role of Mashhad in determining the president	5.65	15
5. Political role of Mashhad in determining the head of the legislature	6.70	13
6. Political role of Mashhad in determining the head of the judicial system	7.52	7
7. The role of Mashhad in determining political policies of the country	7.39	9
8. The role of Mashhad in great political events (for example leadership lectures at the beginning of the new solar year in Mashhad)	10.48	2
9. The role of Mashhad in weakening or supporting the heads of forces	7.85	6
10. The role of Mashhad in politically influencing surrounding countries	7.03	11
11. The role of Mashhad in localizing political places such as the consulate	6.36	14
12. The role of Mashhad in relation with other religious-political centers of Muslim	10.36	3

countries such as Iraq and Lebanon		
13. The role of Mashhad as the base of political flows of the country	7.07	10
14. The role of Mashhad in the politicization of economic, cultural, and social flows	7.45	8
15. The role of Mashhad in forming political flows	6.94	12

The result of the Friedman test indicated that the role of popular characteristics of Mashhad in the Islamic Republic system, the role of Mashhad in great political events (for example leadership lectures at the beginning of the new solar year in Mashhad), the role of Mashhad in relation with other religious-political centers of Muslim countries such as Iraq and Lebanon, had respectively, the highest priorities. In other words, among factors related to the political dimensions of geopolitical factors of religious places of Mashhad, the role of popular characteristics of Mashhad in the Islamic Republic system, and the role of Mashhad in great political events were of utmost importance.



**Figure 5.** The role of Mashhad in the political domain and determining power structure in the Islamic Republic of Iran

Field investigations and the results obtained from the responses of statistical samples to the questionnaire used in this research showed that according to the respondents, the political role of Mashhad in determining power structure in the Islamic Republic of Iran was high.

Mashhad seminary is at the head of political factors and Imam Reza shrine is certainly a great organization. More than 25 million pilgrims travel Mashhad annually. These statistics have been reported by online news sites as elicited from the lectures of the head of the city council of Mashhad. Considering “the love of Ahl al-Bayt in the hearts of all Muslims”, and the presence of thousands of non-Iranian pilgrims in Mashhad, Imam Reza shrine as one of the most important opportunities of exporting Islamic Republic thoughts has a political role. It is well-known that the Imam Reza

shrine organization is one of the most important and strategic organizations of Iran especially in terms of foreign policies regarding economic, touristic, and cultural as well as religious domains.

Mashhad city has had an important functional role regarding vital governmental components in the past and now. This issue has been formed from the religious role of Mashhad considering its political issue, and its historical role also has been prominent since the Nader Shah period till now.

In terms of political changes, Mashhad city has had observed historical events since the past; one of the most important of them in the current period was the construction of Gowhar Shad mosque that caused Mashhad city to have a political pole other than its religious function.

Followed by political events, popular religious characteristics repeated religious issues in line with political flows of the country and entered to the policy of political factors of Mashhad popular faces that Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader was such a person. He was a prominent political characteristic before and after the revolution, whose origin was also Mashhad. Moreover, most of the prominent characteristics of the Islamic Republic of Iran that are head forces or ministers and lawmakers of Mashhad, have promoted the geopolitical value of Mashhad.

This issue has caused the continuance of interactions between system leaders and Mashhad, for example, leader lectures at the beginning of Farvardin month of each year identify annual strategies.

Regarding trans-regional policy-making, Mashhad has relatively good interactions with surrounding countries so that some of the surrounding countries in Mashhad have an active consulate.

Due to the geographical status, Mashhad is near Pakistan country having a high Shia population and is also near Afghanistan having economic and transitional interactions, which causes it to have a certain political structure; on the other hand, its interaction radius is connected to Middle Asian countries from the north.

Accordingly, the consulates of these countries are active in Mashhad, and countries such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon have activated their consulates in Mashhad. All these issues show that the political function factor in Mashhad city has a high value.

In terms of trans-regional politics, Mashhad, as a holy city, could develop international relationships and be a member in the world organizations related to urban management region having required capacity and power and promote sister relationships with eleven various cities in the world and interact master groups for enjoying the last managerial, technical and specialized achievements of developed cities of various countries and transporting their trading to other cities so that currently, it is a member in metropolis organizations, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), a municipal organization for peace and cooperation with UN-HABITAT, cooperation with UNDP, city organizations and Islamic capitals OICC, local government gatherings for sustainable life (IDLEI) and metropolis; it is also a sister city with Urumqi in China, Lahore, and Karachi in Pakistan and Najaf in Iraq. It has also signed a common cooperation protocol with Lebanon, Baghdad, Karbala, and Kadhimiya in Iraq ([WWW.MASHHAD.IR/PORTAL](http://WWW.MASHHAD.IR/PORTAL)).

### C. Geopolitical Factor and Economic Function of Mashhad City

Regarding the economy, the conspicuous growth of various industries such as weaving, dietary, clothing, metal industries and steel factories, agriculture industries, and even economic services parts has highly developed daily having an impure income.

As an important economic organization, the Imam Reza shrine highly affects this rate.

Overall, Mashhad monetizes from three main aspects:

1. The existence of various industries and different companies
2. Astan Quds Razavi and its appurtenances
3. Economic services in the tourism industry section

Although Mashhad has a green economy due to its agricultural space, the existence of various factories and the economic national and even international role of Imam Reza shrine is accompanied by technique economy. In terms of technique economy, also, Mashhad interacts with the green economy, which has caused the prosperity of exporting agricultural and leather materials.

Due to its unique location, Mashhad is the second populated city after Tehran, and as it located in the Silk Road between east and west, and the spice route between north and south in central Asia and the Indian Ocean, it could be identified as the strategic economy capital of Middle East (Wikipedia web, Mashhad economy).

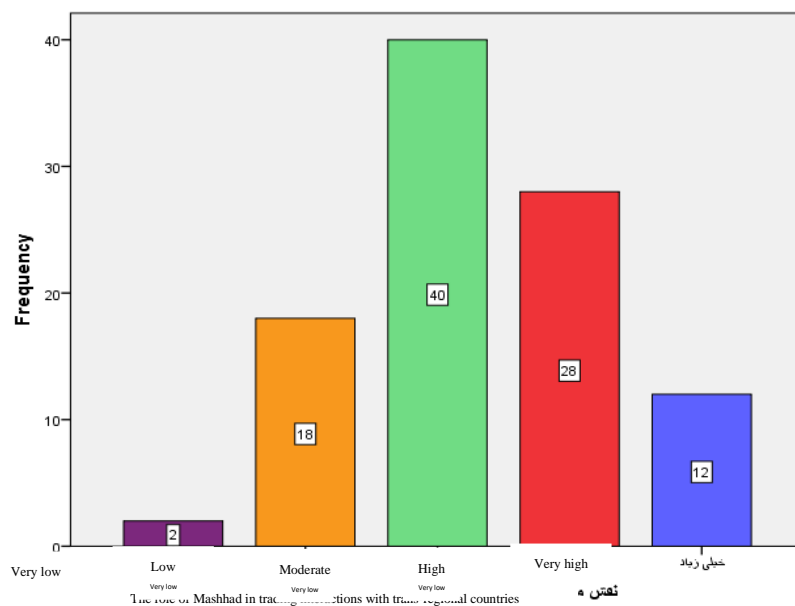
Mashhad exports goods to 75 countries in the world; these statistics show the important trans-regional economy of this city, which have surpassed the surrounding countries and have reached to Europe level.

Mashhad exports almost 30% of its goods to Afghanistan and exports 70% to other countries in the world. The geographical status of Mashhad has been located in the road of Pakistan, Afghanistan, middle Asia, and transit roads, which is almost acceptable to export goods to Turkey to increase the export level for Mashhad.

Factories, companies, and economic institutions that depend on Astan Quds Razavi of Mashhad are highly active whose realm is international especially in terms of exporting and importing; it has given the power and competition feature of economic opportunities parts as a prominent privilege to Astan Quds.

Astan Quds Razavi is one of the greatest economic organizations in the world; various economic holdings that are active under the control of Astan Quds and are possessed by this organization, continue their activities through "Razavi economic organization" verification. This organization has two purposes including the management of Astan Quds assets and promoting the Islamic economic system.

It has also highly considered knowledge economy, humanizing economy, and resistance economy and has taken actions in terms of trying to solve the bereavement.



**Figure 6.** The role of Mashhad in trading interactions with trans-regional countries

The results obtained from field studies showed that the role of Mashhad in trading interactions with trans-regional countries is moderate.

Iran is connected to six geopolitical realms in the current world. Each of these realms has various geopolitical roles proportionate to their social, economic, cultural, and political system features of their constituent countries; Iran, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are among such countries that have obtained double importance after the collapse of Soviet Union.

There is much evidence showing that a new "Hartland" is being formed in the world, in which Iran is located at the center and eastern region of Iran, especially Razavi Khorasan province and Mashhad, as a metropolitan, is one of its important strategic centers. On the other hand, geopolitical unity and equilibrium of each land play an important role in advancing political-geographical perspective strategies.

The existing vast gap in Iran's natural geographical space resulting from two wide central and eastern plains, Dasht-e Kavir and the Dasht-e Lut, have led to the underdevelopment and spatial separation of the eastern region of Iran and have negatively affected Iran geopolitical equilibrium and unity. Although the presence of Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad has had an important role in reducing this effect, and Iranian people have always had a spiritual relationship with Mashhad metropolitan, its spatial separation has caused such severe underdevelopment that compared to the central and western parts, it seems impossible to have a desired perspective without having a macro and strategic approach toward the development of eastern axis and without considering the role of Mashhad metropolitan in developing, organizing and spatial equilibrium of this axis.

Housing and Construction Company Quds Razavi have established international construction company of Razavi to be present in extraterritorial activities and issuing technical as well as engineering services to other places of Iran and foreign countries; it has actively

participated in international tender offers such as the construction of Euphrates great bridge in the main international road of Iraq to Syria and the bridge on Euphrates river and 1000 m length in Syria.

**Economic Institutions of Astan Quds Razavi** also have played an important role in meeting the resistance economy through producing local products and have helped to the promotion of local production power. These institutions have played a vital role in providing economic independence of the country regarding various economic fields through producing local products whose importing and event exporting to the market of surrounding countries were dependent previously.

**Table 7.** Prioritizing factors related to economic dimensions of geopolitical factors of religious places of Mashhad

Factors related to the economic dimensions of geopolitical Factors	Mean score	Priority
1. The role of Mashhad in attracting foreign tourists and increasing national income	6.64	2
2. The role of Mashhad in trading interactions with surrounding countries	5.46	6
3. The role of Mashhad in trading interactions with trans-regional countries	3.89	10
4. The role of Mashhad in settling great industrial factories	5.29	7
5. The capacity of Astan Quds organization in industrial-regional expansion	6.71	1
6. The role of Astan Quds in developing and expanding trading exchanges with surrounding countries	5.51	5
7. The role of Astan Quds in agricultural development	5.59	4
8. Astan Quds as an organization independent from economic control of the government	5.90	3
9. The capability of Astan Quds in advancing the economic plans of the country	5.02	8
10. the capability of Astan Quds in administering constructive designs of the country	4.99	9

The results of the Friedman test showed that the capacity of Astan Quds organization in industrial-regional expansion, the role of Mashhad in attracting foreign tourists and increasing national income, and Astan Quds as an organization independent from economic control of the government, respectively, had the highest priorities. In other words, among factors related to economic dimensions of geopolitical factors of Mashhad religious places, the capacity of Astan Quds organization in industrial-regional expansion, the role of Mashhad in attracting foreign tourists and increasing national income, and Astan Quds as an organization independent from economic control of the government had more roles than other factors.

To compile macro policies of Astan Quds Razavi regarding the economy, an economic working group was held in Tehran via inviting experts and economists in several sessions; actually, dos and don'ts of Astan Quds economic activities were summed up.

The fifth part of the macro policies document of Astan Quds Razavi entails economic activities of Astan as the following:

- Serving pilgrims and neighboring especially deprived and poor people and meeting resistance economy policies are the orientation governing all economic activities of Astan Quds Razavi.
- Separating the part of helping deprived people from economic and endowment activities
- Settling optimal management in all economic activities
- Providing the possibility of people participation especially entrepreneurship, innovators, and elites of the country through prioritizing deprived people of the society
- Agility, re-engineering, and reducing the involvement of the government in economic activities
- Attracting the confidence of the society with appropriate performance, precise apparent financial reporting, appropriate informing and applying decisive policies of financial and economic health
- Considering rules governing the endowment while doing economic activities of Astan Quds Razavi

## CONCLUSION

**Religion and religious beliefs have had an important role in the emergence and formation of cities**, which have played a vital role in the spread and formation of cities. Moreover, the companionship and value that governors and the government of that time bestowed to the beliefs of people, affected the development and spread of such cities, making them the center of attention; as a result, the ground was provided for the development and competition. As time passed, some of these religious cities gained geopolitical value in the region and trans-regional areas.

Although the concept of geopolitics has been entitled to this applicable branch of political geographical science and most of the experts have theorized on that, the content of this concept had been highlighted since the formation and development of cities.

Human history has witnessed that some of the cities have more geopolitical value. Regarding the importance of urban geopolitics, it could be mentioned that each geographical and urban region having geopolitical power and value, can affect other cities show off itself.



**Overall, in studying urban geopolitics, concepts such as power, and competition are at the center of urban geopolitical studies.**

The main indicator of Mashhad was religion and Shia geopolitics with the centrality of Imam Reza shrine; however, other religious centers such as Khajeh Abasalt Shrine, Tomb of Khajeh Rabie, and Haruniyeh Dome that are located surrounding Mashhad, witness Shia history in a narrative form. It could be concluded that in terms of function and religion as well as a geographical factor, Mashhad city having the centrality of Imam Reza shrine, not only has a national function but also has international and sometimes global functions. This subject identifies the concept of Shia geopolitical power. The subject of Shia influence, realm, and power of Mashhad city have a historical root whose expanse is really wide and dates back to the past and continues to now.

According to the conducted studies, it seems that Mashhad has many capacities and capabilities in terms of various functions and factors. Regarding the urban geopolitics dimension, Mashhad depicts power and regarding other urban factors, it shows competition.

The role of Astan Quds Razavi is perceptible in highlighting the religious geopolitics of Mashhad since the past. The existence of cultural activities, publications, set of precious books, and museums have doubled the functional religious value of Mashhad. Astan Quds is one of the important religious institutions that have been considered by benefactors during history till now and has involved housing and wealth benefactors as well as places and trading and economic centers to this Astan, which have caused the power phenomenon to empower this Astan in terms of economy.

**Religious functions of Mashhad city** include educational and cultural actions such as Imam Reza shrine`s programs, facilities of Astan Quds Razavi for developing Razavi culture in this city and accepting students from the world and foreign countries, the central branch of seminary as well as various religious and popular schools which also accept local students and students from foreign countries; these are among effective actions in terms of propagating Razavi culture and attracting local and foreign tourists.

Mashhad is the cultural capital of the Islamic world since it is the first metropolitan of the religious world; in 2005, Mecca has been granted as the first Islamic cultural capital in Islamic conference of cultural ministers of Islamic countries and it was in the 5<sup>th</sup> of Bahman 1395 ( 24<sup>th</sup> of January 2017) that Mashhad was identified as the second religious metropolitan of the world by ISESCO or “scientific, cultural and educational organization of Islamic countries”, which is an organization dependent on Islamic conference organization and is responsible for choosing cultural capitals of the Islamic world (online journal: [parstoday.com\dairy.news](http://parstoday.com\dairy.news)).

Selecting Mashhad as the cultural capital of the Islamic world among Asian countries has provided a unique opportunity for this city revealing the religious geopolitical value of this city to a great extent.

**Regarding political function and trans-regional policy**, Mashhad has great interactions with surrounding countries. Figures and researches show that the role of Mashhad is high in determining the power structure of the Islamic Republic. Due to Mashhad's geographical status that is located in the proximity of Pakistan having a high Shia population, and Afghanistan having economic and transit interaction, it has a certain political structure whose interaction radius has been stretched from north to Middle Asia countries. Accordingly, the consulates of these countries are active in Mashhad, and countries such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon have also activated their consulates in Mashhad. All these issues show that the political function factor of Mashhad has a high value.

Regarding the geopolitical factors of Mashhad, it seems that due to having certain political, economic, religious, and tourism conditions, Mashhad city has a clear sign of power and it has a clear sign of competition in other urban factors in the urban geopolitics dimension.

After the settlement of the Islamic Republic, Mashhad has been active in different political domains. Investigations indicate that the political role of Mashhad in determining the elements of the Islamic Republic system and its heads is high, which means that its role in the power structure of the Islamic Republic system is high and can be highlighted at the trans-regional level.

**Regarding economic function**, analyses show that there are an ever-increasing growth and high impure income regarding the economy and the growth of various industries such as weaving, dietary, clothing, metal industries and steel factories, agricultural industries, and even economic services section. Astan Quds Razavi, as an important economic organization is effective in the highness of this rate.

Overall, Mashhad has its monetization from three main aspects:

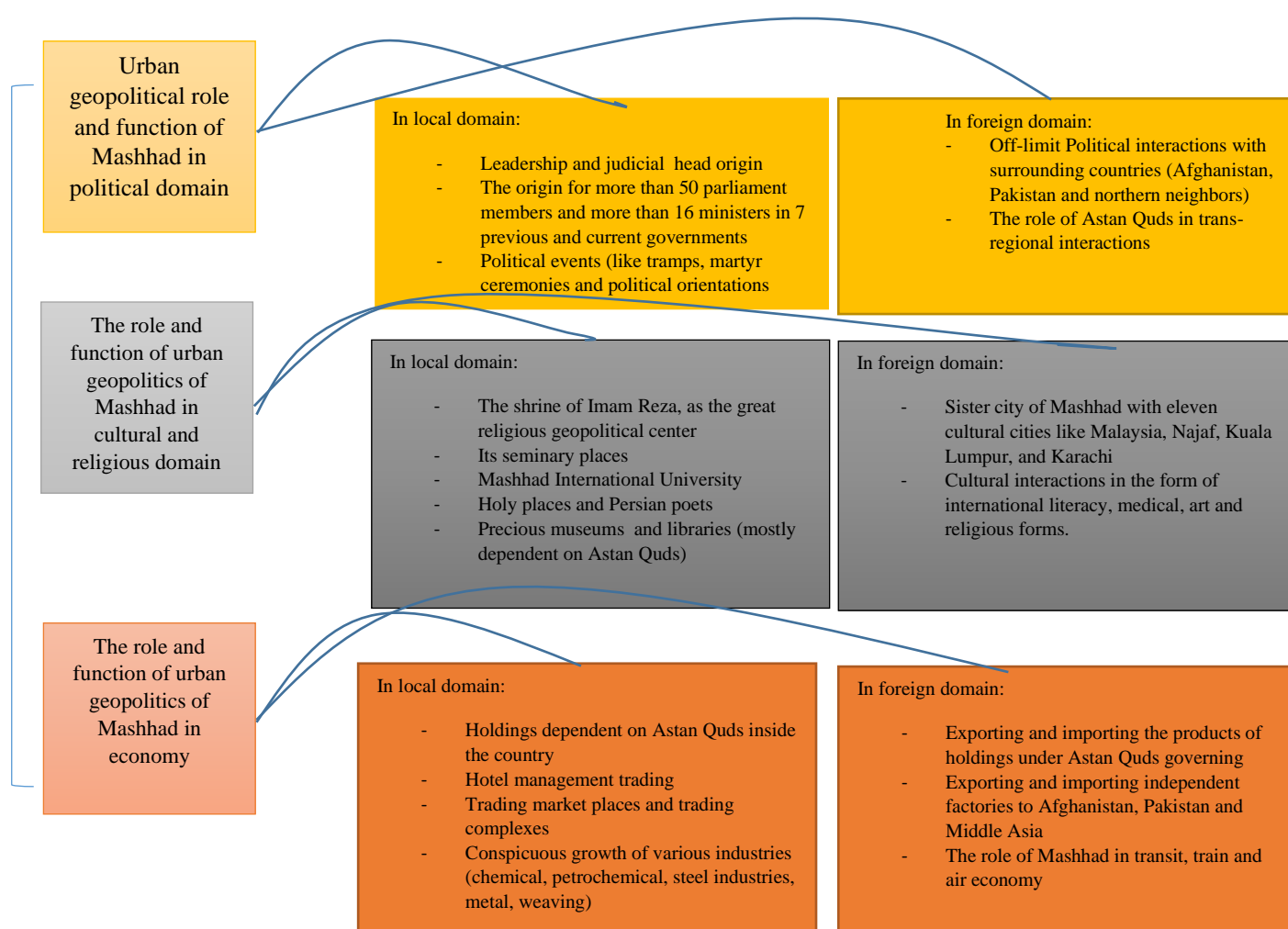
1. The existence of different industries and various factories
2. Astan Quds Razavi and its appurtenances
3. Economic services in industry-tourism section

Although Mashhad has a green economy due to the vast agricultural industry, it also has a technique economy because of different factories and the economic role of Astan Quds, which is national and international.

Astan Quds Razavi is one of the greatest economic organizations in the world whose wealth has been predicted to be equal to 770 milliard dollars; this calculation has been announced officially by Fox news Iran institution. Different economic holdings that are under the control of Astan

Quds and are possessed by it, have been active under the “Razavi economic organization”. This organization has two purposes including the management of Astan Quds assets and promoting the Islamic economic system.

It has also done some effective actions regarding knowledge economy, humanizing economy, and resistance economy and has sought to solve the bereavement. Overall, the geopolitical factors of Mashhad can be stated in the following conceptual diagram.



Conceptual model 1 **Conceptual model (1):** Geopolitical structure of Mashhad (political, religious, and economic functions)

### EXPECTATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Despite the facilities and the high capacity of Mashhad, it is expected that this city may use all capacities in terms of geopolitical factors since this important and golden opportunity can promote the geopolitical

conditions of the country to a great extent. Mashhad urban space management has many problems in terms of the physical features of this population density variation. Mashhad urban management seeks to expand urban space with the centrality of the Razavi shrine. Although these conditions promote the qualitative conditions of the city, since weak policies in urban management cause distance and differentiation for the old urban fabric, unfortunately, urban distinctions and inequalities are observed in the city view.

This is while Mashhad should have the highest conditions in terms of urban management due to the interaction with important cities like Lahore, Karachi, and nine other cities that have signed sister protocol.

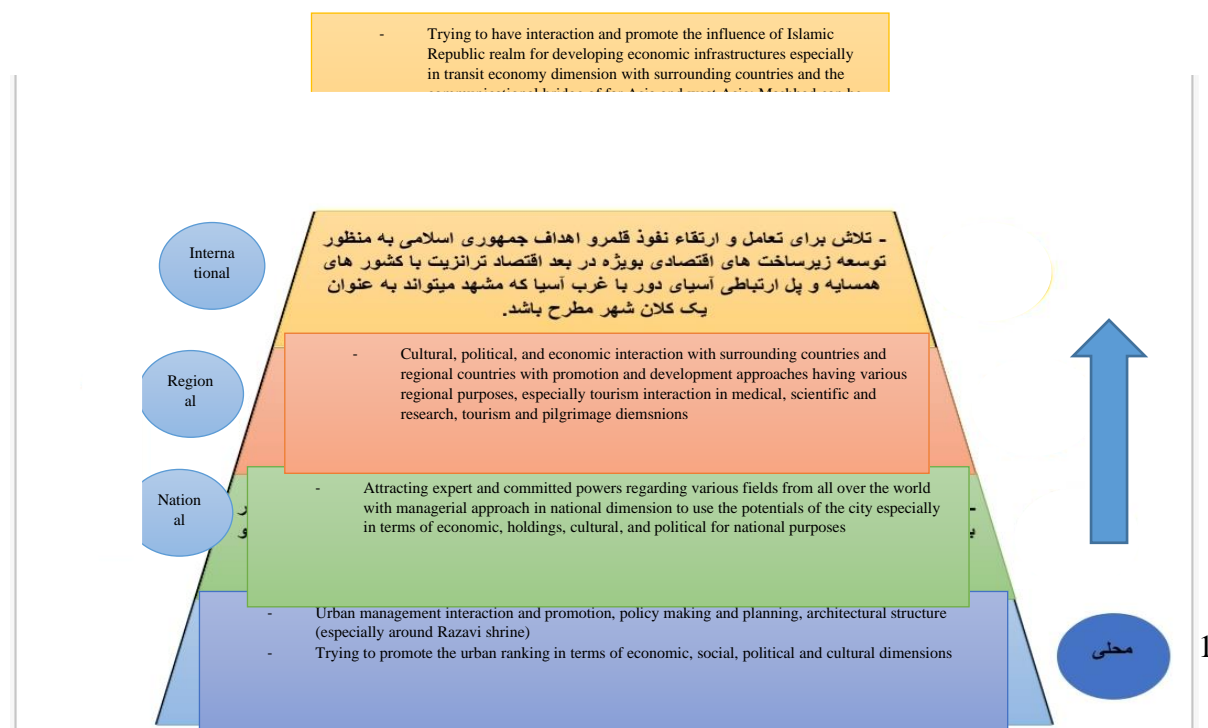
It is suggested to improve the capacities and capabilities of Mashhad as a metropolitan which is shining like a brilliant sun in its Islamic realm; in this regard, it should be supported by organizations, researchers, knowledge institutions, and pundits.

Infrastructures and constructive factors such as metro, urban roads, bus transportation, urban constructive management, urban view structure, and municipality should fit such a city that has the privilege of Islamic world centrality.

It is suggested to use political, economic, and religious factors to have positive interactions for being convergent to the surrounding countries and new realms, even Muslim countries of West Asia.

Astan Quds Razavi has these great facilities and power and high skill to promote urban development and take responsibility from the Islamic Republic government; it can also help in the construction and administration of great and mega projects as well as economic power of Mashhad and the country seriously.

Finally, it should be stated that Mashhad can solve the bereavements and play important role in solving the administration of great projects, economic and political interaction with surrounding countries and help to make high-rank decisions





## Conceptual Model (2)

The diagram of promoting geopolitical factors of Mashhad in local, national, regional and international dimensions

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