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# Consequences of Military Campaigns and Forced Migration in the Central and Northern Cities of Iran during the Timurid Era

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## ABSTRACT

The economic and military policies of the Timurids led to decisions involving the forced migration of scholars and notables, merchants, and craftsmen to cities supported by the Timurid rulers. Following these policies, commercial routes were also redirected. Consequently, some cities such as Samarqand, Herat, and neighboring urban centers experienced significant prosperity, whereas others that were no longer located along the newly established trade routes fell into decline. Therefore, it can be argued that Timurid forced-migration policies, alongside factors such as natural disasters and internal rebellions in certain cities, played a decisive role in the stagnation and deterioration of many cities in Iran. The purpose of this article is to examine the policies of forced relocation of notables, merchants, and craftsmen from the beginning to the end of Shāhrukh's reign and to identify the factors contributing to the development and decline of central and northern Iranian cities during this period. It seeks to answer the question of how Timurid population-relocation policies affected urban life and urbanization during this era. Accordingly, the hypothesis proposed in this article is that the Timurid policy of relocating prominent urban figures, merchants, and craftsmen to governmental centers such as Samarqand and Herat promoted the development of these cities and altered their demographic composition in social and cultural terms, while conversely causing the decline, stagnation, and marginalization of central and northern Iranian cities.

**Keywords:** *Timurid period, commercial cities, forced migration, urban decline*

## Introduction

The term *shahr* (city) derives from the Middle Persian words *khastahr* and *khastahra* in Avestan and Old Persian, originating from the verb *vaxšī*, meaning “to rule,” “to exercise sovereignty,” “to be able,” or “to dare.” This etymology demonstrates the inherent connection between governance and political authority (*politique-politic*) and the city as an administrative, regulatory, and defensive entity. In the Persian language, the semantic expansion and generalization of the word *shahr* extends far beyond the meaning it conveys today. In antiquity, the concept of the city (*polis*) could refer to an entire country or a vast region, and references to “the city of Iran” or *Īrānshahr* in early texts signify the whole territorial domain of Iran (1). The meaning of *shahr* as “province” or “region” was also widely used during the Islamic period. In the humanities, the concept of the city is often equated with that of civilization; under this interpretation, the city must be regarded as possessing at least seven millennia of antiquity, emerging



only two to three thousand years after the Neolithic Revolution as rural communities gradually transformed into permanent settlements and expanded continuously to the present day (2).

Since ancient times, geographical conditions have played a crucial role in selecting locations for urban foundations. In reality, while geographical considerations are among the most decisive factors in the spatial, physical, and natural formation of a city, other perspectives such as political, economic, and social factors hold significant importance in the continued development of an urban settlement. From a political perspective, the movement of power within the urban space and its internal relations are examined from the earliest stages of urban emergence through its long-term continuity. This continuity introduces institutions, legal frameworks, and specialized professional spaces, and it creates increasingly distinct separations between residential and occupational zones. As a result, a unique urban culture emerges, carrying within it numerous subcultures.

From an economic perspective, a city is justified by the assembly of economic conditions that enable it to function as a center for the storage of foodstuffs (grains, water, etc.), valuable items (precious objects, weaponry, etc.), and as a hub of exchange and commerce (3). From a social perspective, the city is defined as a social reality whose form and substance evolve along a long-term trajectory (2). In summary, several factors contribute to urban development and advancement: first, the will of an individual such as a king or governor in earlier times or the decisions of a central government, which often established cities for political or military reasons; second, commercial and economic factors, as cities located along major trade or transportation routes—benefiting from exchanges and mobility—tended to flourish. Conversely, the decline of cities throughout history has resulted from changes in transportation networks, the loss of commercial importance, failures in irrigation systems, uprisings against local rulers, the loss of political or administrative centrality, and similar causes. Political and military forced migrations have also been among the most influential factors shaping the development or decline of cities from antiquity to the present.

Given that urban development is deeply shaped by political, social, religious, and cultural conditions, the post-Mongol era represents one of the most transformative periods in the history of Iranian urbanism. This study seeks to examine the factors responsible for urban development or decline during the Timurid period, with a specific focus on forced migration.

Various theories have been proposed regarding the rise and decline of cities in Iranian history. As Mīrja'farī, Yūsuf Jamālī, and Mūgū'ī argue in their article "Factors in the Growth and Decline of Iranian Cities in the Timurid Era," factors such as favorable geographical location, access to sufficient water and arable land, industrial production and export commodities, advantageous commercial positions, proximity to major communication routes, and the attraction of migrants to expanding cities contributed to the growth and population increase of Timurid cities (4). On the other hand, factors such as changes in transportation networks, the loss of commercial status, deterioration of irrigation systems, agricultural decline, unfavorable climates, lack of access to groundwater and arable land, excessive taxation, exploitative administrative practices, and natural disasters such as earthquakes, plague, and cholera led to the stagnation and downfall of cities during the Timurid period (5). This article addresses these various factors alongside migration policies, though not exclusively the latter.

Likewise, Mūgū'ī, Mīrja'farī, and Yūsuf Jamālī, in their article "Timurid City-Building Activities in the Cities of Samarqand and Herat," examine the commercial and economic position of these cities, which served as governmental centers and military headquarters for Timur and Shāhrukh. They demonstrate that ensuring the security of trade routes leading to these cities and providing urban amenities were of great importance (6).

Dīnparast, in his study “Timur’s Commercial Policies and Their Consequences,” identifies commercial development as the most significant factor behind the prosperity of cities and the Iranian economy during Timur’s rule. He argues that Timur strengthened domestic trade by securing trade routes and constructing caravanserais, while also expanding foreign trade networks, reviving the *ortāq* partnership system, and imposing customs duties such as *tamghā* on merchants. By blocking the northern Caspian trade route and redirecting commerce to the southern Caspian corridor, Timur revitalized Silk Road trade within Iran. As a result, cities such as Tabriz, Soltaniyeh, Samarqand, Herat, and Hormuz experienced economic growth (7). The present study approaches these issues from a different angle by exploring the consequences of Timurid migration policies and their role in the decline of northern and central Iranian cities compared with thriving, migration-receiving centers like Samarqand and Herat.

Considering these theories, it may be concluded that patterns of urban growth and decline in the Timurid era resembled those of the Mongol era. Timur’s continuous military campaigns destroyed many cities; however, others flourished under his and his successors’ patronage. Timur relocated craftsmen and skilled workers from conquered cities to his capital, Samarqand, and surrounding regions, thereby fostering the development of his administrative and political centers. In contrast, the cities that lost their artisans became depopulated and economically stagnant. Another policy involved redirecting northern trade routes, since the mountainous regions of northern Iran were difficult for Timur to control permanently. He thus sought to monopolize east–west trade routes by conquering Iraq, the Caucasus, and Anatolia, through which major trading paths passed. He blocked northern caravan routes along the Black Sea and Caspian corridors—regions he could not reliably dominate—and destroyed the cities along those routes, causing many inhabitants either to migrate or to flee. This process led to urban stagnation and population decline in northern and central Iranian cities, which is the focus of the present study (8, 9).

### The Period of Urban Decline in Central and Northern Iran

In the 14th century, following the death of Sultan Abū Sa’īd in 1333, each regional commander came to be known as the ruler of a particular province, and many provincial governors laid claim to independence. As a result, numerous cities were repeatedly attacked and plundered by rival rulers. This situation meant that the city, as the primary seat of the Ilkhan and the symbol of his authority, became the continual target of assaults. The storming of cities, the massacre of their inhabitants, and the destruction of urban fabric became commonplace in this period. The destructive campaigns of Timur and his successors represent the culmination of these upheavals, extending across the entire 14th and 15th centuries. During this time, urban life and urbanism reached their lowest point. The absence of a strong, centralized state—of the kind that had existed before the Mongol invasions—led to the emergence of numerous local polities, large and small, that did not always embody the full meaning of “state” in the political sense. Consequently, for a considerable period, the very idea of a coherent urban network lost its significance. In this context, the efforts of Shāhrukh, his Timurid successors, and the Āq Qoyunlū and Qara Qoyunlū rulers in the west and northwest, as well as the Muzaffarids in Kerman, Shiraz, Yazd, and other centers, to rebuild and develop cities such as Mashhad, Herat, Bukhara, and Samarqand in Greater Khorasan, enabled a slow and partial revival of urban life; production, distribution, and exchange regained some measure of vitality (3). Yet these efforts never restored urban prosperity to its pre-Mongol levels: extensive irrigation and water-supply systems were never fully repaired or rendered efficient again, and cycles of plunder and defensive warfare persisted. Whereas the pre-Mongol urban economy had been organized around offensive and expansionist warfare, the post-Mongol

order rested on limited defense, preventing capital accumulation and the expansion of long-distance trade. Thus the cities of central and northern Iran constantly lived under the threat of attack and collapse (3).

In his account of the events of 1389, Samarqandī reports: “Aghjakī came from Hamadan and Kurdistan with abundant spoils... and Shaykh Ḥājī plundered the households of Ray; in Qazvin he seized great wealth, and two thousand men gathered around him” (10).

Timur, during his five-year campaign, reached Gurgān in 1392. On the road between Ray and Hamadan, no one offered resistance. In Gurgān, he incited his troops to move against Mazandaran, which at that time was torn by intense internal conflict. Sayyid Amīr Qavām al-Dīn, who claimed descent from Imām Ḥasan al-‘Askarī, resided in Āmol. Amīr Afrāsīyāb Chulāvī, the ruler of Āmol, was devoted to and a follower of the sayyid, but Qavām al-Dīn exploited this devotion and had him killed at an opportune moment (11). In this way, Mazandaran fell under the control of Sayyid Qavām al-Dīn, and he and his sons ruled from Āmol. Amīr Iskandar Shīkī, Afrāsīyāb’s son, after his father’s murder, sought refuge with Timur in Khorasan in order to regain his lost authority. Timur then marched toward Mazandaran. For two months and six days, fighting took place daily; many bridges and forests were destroyed during this time. At the end of the campaign, the sayyids were separated from the common people, and an order was issued to slaughter the rest, so that nearly a thousand people were killed at once. Timur commanded that the sayyids be placed on ships and transferred to Transoxiana (11). Once they arrived, each group of sayyids was dispatched to a different location: some to Samarqand, others to Sīrwan, Otrar, and Kashghar, and some to Khwarazm. Many children were separated from their parents and sent in different directions. “Two sayyids—one named ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, a descendant of Sayyid Raḍī al-Dīn, and another named Mīr ‘Abd al-‘Azīm, a descendant of Sayyid Zayn al-‘Ābidīn—escaped and fled to Gilan... After that, the victorious sovereign ordered Sārī and Āmol to be plundered and put to the sword, so that in all the territories of Mazandaran not a single cock or hen remained to crow or lay an egg; the surviving remnant fled in every direction, and many elderly, weak, and infant refugees died of hunger...” (12).

Regarding the events of 1403, it is reported that “a royal decree was issued that Prince Iskandar and Amīr Shāh Malik should move from the Mīyāneh region toward Ray, gather the troops of the surrounding districts, and join Prince Rustam and Amīr Sulaymān Shāh. The exalted sovereign crossed the bridge at Mīyāneh and encamped at Sar Cham... Later that year, the majestic court arrived in Soltaniyeh. Those who had gone to confiscate the wealth of the people of Gilan returned there, bringing abundant coin, horses, textiles, and provisions. The victorious banners then departed from Soltaniyeh, and after several stages, the plain of Qazvin was honored by the descent of the triumphant camp. Prince Abū Bakr, riding with all haste from Baghdad, reached the plain of Qazvin within nine days” (10).

The army of Prince Abū Bakr, in 1406, also turned to the devastation of the central cities (the province of ‘Irāq). “Some of Prince Abū Bakr’s followers conceived the idea... to plunder the province of ‘Irāq, especially Soltaniyeh and Qazvin, and then withdraw to Khorasan” (13). The inhabitants of Semnan had previously resisted Prince Amīrānshāh, only to be plundered by his troops and forced to abandon the city. In 1405–1406, during Prince Abū Bakr’s campaign against the same city, no one was found there; the people had already fled their homes and taken refuge in the surrounding mountains, whereupon the army plundered the city a second time (13).

The Spanish traveler Clavijo, who visited Zanjan, Qazvin, and the neighboring regions in the 15th century during Timurid rule, describes the depopulation of Zanjan, the destruction of its city walls, and the drying up of its canals (14). He further writes: “...We arrived at a place called Sagzīābād and spent the night there... The following day,

Wednesday, we came to a fortress that had recently been ruined and abandoned. We were told that Timur and his followers had passed there about a month earlier and, finding insufficient grain and fodder for their cattle and horses, ordered his men to make up for this shortage by seizing the standing crops that were ready for harvest. Once Timur had moved on, his companions and soldiers immediately began looting and plundering, taking everything that remained, and for this reason the inhabitants abandoned their homeland” (14). On the ruined condition of Qazvin, he reports: “On Tuesday, 3 February, we reached a city called Qazvin. Here most of the houses have fallen into ruin. In the past, the number of houses in this city exceeded that of all the cities we saw in those regions, with the exception of Tabriz and Samarqand” (14). Thus, in this period, misery and misfortune descended upon Qazvin to such an extent that most of its districts became depopulated (8).

Consequently, as a result of successive revolts and conflicts, the cities of Mazandaran, Gilan, and such centers as Qazvin and Semnan never experienced lasting peace. In 1410, for example, “news arrived that a certain Kiyā Mard Ṭāleqānī and Mazīd Bakkana, together with a band of troublemakers, had entertained wicked schemes and advanced upon the environs of Qazvin, plundering several places... Amīr Baṣṭām, learning of this on the 26th of Shawwal, marched out... and on Friday in Dhu'l-Qa'da, near Qazvin, the two sides met and the flames of war were kindled” (13). Regarding the events of 1413–1414 and the devastation of Iranian cities during Shāhrukh's reign by Qara Yūsuf, it is recorded that “Amir [Qara] Yūsuf spent that winter in Tabriz... and utter ruin befell that region, especially Soltaniyeh, Qazvin, Hamadan, and Darjīn, through plunder and the destruction of buildings” (13). In 1467–1468, the killing of Jahān Shāh sparked widespread unrest in many Iranian lands: “In Tabriz, the sons of Mīrzā Iskandar rose in rebellion, followed later by Ḥasan 'Alī, son of Jahān Shāh Mīrzā. In Soltaniyeh, Shāh Manṣūr Shāhsuvar rose up; in Ṭārom, Zayn al-'Ābidīn Shaykh Ḥājī 'Irāqī with the support and aid of the amirs of Gilan; in Qazvin, the amirs of Kārkiyā, namely Sulṭān Muḥammad Lāhījī; and in Ray and Khwār, the amirs of Rustamdār and the Chulāvīs; while from Kerman Abū'l-Qāsim Mīrzā, son of Jahān Shāh, marched with an army toward Ādharbayjān” (15).

During the Timurid period, royal residences were frequently moved from one location to another. This practice was motivated by several factors, notably warfare and the search for suitable summer and winter pastures. It was a common custom under the Jalayirids, Timurids, and Turkmen dynasties. On such occasions, the entire courtly apparatus, under the ruler's command, would abandon the capital and encamp in distant parts of the realm, often accompanied by the plunder and despoiling of other cities. As Ḥasan Beg Rūmlū relates concerning the events of 1429, “Jahān Shāh Pādshāh [Muẓaffar al-Dīn Jahān Shāh], who had taken his winter quarters in Ray, declared his opposition, had the governor of Qazvin put to death, seized that city, and took abundant wealth from the great and small of that land...” (15).

For this reason, the reforms, restoration of public order, and reconstruction measures that followed Timur's devastations did not, in practice, extend to the northern and central cities of Iran. Even during the long reigns of Shāhrukh, Abū Sa'īd, and Ḥusayn Bāyqarā—periods which, in comparison with the early Timurid era and its middle phases, represented a relative stabilization of affairs—many of these cities remained in constant turmoil. Repeated uprisings, Turkmen incursions from the west, Uzbek and Mongol attacks from the east, unending succession struggles, the continual passage of armies, and the confiscation of urban resources all contributed to lasting unrest and stagnation in the cities of central and northern Iran.

## The Impact of Forced Migration on the Stagnation of Central and Northern Cities

One of the distinctive features of the merchant class from the 14th century onward was its close association with large landowners. Holders of *suyurghāl* grants, administrators of waqf lands, and owners of private estates, unlike their predecessors in the early Islamic centuries, preferred to reside in cities far from their landed domains, where they were counted among the influential urban notables. Their substantial incomes enabled them to participate in various types of commercial activity, primarily through investment and by allocating considerable portions of their agricultural products to “merchant-princes” in return for a share of the profits. The conditions for such arrangements were favorable, since, from the time of the Mongol conquest, peasant dues were generally paid in kind. Landowners, for their part, invested the greater portion of their wealth that was not immediately required for commercial transactions, and even provincial rulers did not hesitate to commit part of their private capital to trade. That this phenomenon was characteristic of large-scale commerce in that period is evident from the very title given to these merchant-princes: *ortāq* in Turkic (from *ortaq*, meaning “partner” or “sharer”) (16, 17).

Following the fragmentation of the Mongol state, the northern provinces were among the first to sever their ties with the empire (18). Thus Astarābād and eastern Mazandaran fell under the control of Amīr Valī, who was defeated by Timur. Because a Shi'i lineage held both political and religious authority there, with Mazandaran as their center of rule, Timur attacked the region, had the sayyids placed on ships and sent out to sea and then to the Oxus (Amu Darya), from where they were dispatched to their designated places of residence in Khwarazm, Samarqand, and Tashkent (8).

After Timur's death in 1405, many of these deported populations appear to have wished to seize the first opportunity to return to their homelands. A number of them did in fact succeed in returning, among the most prominent of whom were the Mar'ashīs of Ṭabaristān (12). Yet upon their return, these sayyids had lost all their former independence and political and economic significance and no longer possessed their earlier status.

During the intense conflicts among the rulers of Ṭabaristān, Rūyān, Mazandaran, the Jalāyirids, and the Muzaffarids, many cities suffered severe damage and were plundered repeatedly, and groups of their inhabitants were forcibly relocated outside the region. As a result, the urban fabric and architectural ensembles of these cities sustained extensive destruction. In the time of Jalāl al-Dawla Iskandar, many inhabitants of Qazvin were deported to Kujur. In this period, following the death of Malik Tāj al-Dawla, the ruler of Rustamdār and Rūyān, in 1333, his son Malik Jalāl al-Dawla Iskandar succeeded him and, with the support of his brothers, strengthened his power and expanded his domains by seizing central cities. Mīr Sayyid Ṣahīr al-Dīn Mar'ashī writes: “...He brought the mountainous districts from the limits of Qazvin to Semnan under the control of his *dīvān*, and those territories which had been held by various amirs, grandees, and notable men of the age, both Turk and Tajik, he brought under his own rule. From there he went to the plain of Ray and took possession of all the lands of Ray contiguous with the mountains, so that all of Ray and Qazvin, like Kavīr and Firuzabad, sent their revenues as his property into his flourishing treasury, and in those regions he founded settlements and fortresses and built strong citadels” (12).

He continues: “...Thus he became independent and firmly established as ruler in Rūyān, and he deported many of the people of Qazvin to Kujur, levying taxes from that city for three years and... assigning suitable places of residence to each group” (12). It is reported that nearly two to three hundred village headmen (*kadkhudās*) were brought from Qazvin to Kujur (12).



Since Timur, following the Mongol precedent, also granted *yurts* (winter pastures and territorial fiefs) to his followers, he consulted with his subordinate commanders about their winter *yurt* claims and assigned to each of them a specific city or province. Under this policy, insecurity once again spread through these districts, and continuous military campaigns became the norm. The armies, constantly on the move, became parasites upon the urban and rural populations, while the victorious commanders issued orders assigning the resources of towns and villages to their retainers. Thus, whenever a conqueror approached, the inhabitants, fearing exactions and requisitions, would disperse (18). The remoteness of the central and northern cities of Iran from the Timurid capitals, the rebellions of regional magnates, and the persistent lack of peace and security in these areas were among the most important causes of commercial stagnation and the migration of merchants to more prosperous urban centers.

As recorded under the events of 1442–1443, “Malik Kayumars of Rustamdār cast off the collar of obedience and sent a band of mischief-makers and satanic followers—vile and contemptible as swine and bears, and worthless like dogs and cats...—to raid Ray and Damavand... When this news reached the exalted sovereign, he set out against that ill-fated one with a calamity-bringing army. As the victorious camp passed through the district of Nishapur, great fear fell upon Malik Kayumars... In consequence, the sovereign pardoned his offence and returned toward Herat, granting the governorship of the provinces of Soltaniyeh, Qazvin, Ray, and Qom to Mīrzā Sulṭān Muḥammad Baysunghur” (15). Thus, the inhabitants of cities already impoverished by war, famine, and forced migration were further oppressed by tax-collectors who treated them with injustice and violence, accelerating the collapse of urban life.

The famous Italian traveler Marco Polo, writing in the late 13th century, reports that Genoese merchants sailed the Caspian Sea, maintained regular commercial relations with Iran, and traded in silk with the people of Gilan (19). By the Timurid period, however, commerce in northern Iran had fallen into deep stagnation. According to Barthold, the development of urban life and the establishment of crafts and trades in Gilan did not begin until after the 10th century CE (8). Thus the plundering of local property and the devastation of agricultural lands by state troops and soldiers compounded the crisis and contributed to further decline.

The imposition of heavy taxes likewise played a major role in the growing stagnation of these cities. After the death of Shāhrukh in 1447, Muḥammad Sulṭān came to Isfahan, and his vizier, Shaykh al-Islām Sa’d al-Dīn Abī’l-Khayr, decreed that in Yazd and its neighboring districts a special tax for the army be levied on each household, to be collected by draft-holders from Isfahan. These exactions plunged the population into misery (18).

By imperial decree, the provinces of Soltaniyeh, Qazvin, Ray, and Qom were subsequently granted to Mīrzā Sulṭān Muḥammad, son of Baysunghur. In those regions he began to seize the wealth of the affluent and exert pressure on the local population: “...They raised Mīrzā Sulṭān Muḥammad, son of Mīrzā Baysunghur, to the sovereignty of ‘Irāq and unfurled the banner of rule for that fortunate young prince over those lands. Consequently, the victorious khāqān bestowed the standard of government of the provinces of Soltaniyeh, Qazvin, Ray, and Qom upon that illustrious scion of the realm, adorned the prince’s ears with the pearls of beneficial counsel, and granted him the honor of permission to depart. Amīr Jalāl al-Dīn Firūz Shāh accompanied Mīrzā Sulṭān Muḥammad as far as Basṭām with great honor and then returned from that lofty station. When Mīrzā Sulṭān Muḥammad reached his destination, he raised the banner of justice and beneficence; many people from the surrounding towns and cities came to his court, and proud commanders and warlike captains enrolled themselves among his servants, cherishing the sight of his auspicious footsteps. Yet the prince’s revenues did not suffice for his expenditures, and he stretched out the hand of appropriation toward the property of some of the wealthy. When this news reached the royal capital

of Herat, the protector of his subjects commanded that Soltaniyeh and Qazvin should be the *suyurghāl* of Mīrzā Sultān Muḥammad and that he should not interfere in the revenues of other provinces" (20).

The reports of historians thus reveal persistent unrest in the northern and central cities of Iran and the systematic plundering of their wealth by state authorities. From the death of Timur in 1405 until the accession of Shāh Ismā'īl I in 1501, unfavorable conditions prevailed in these regions, and power over the cities frequently shifted from one king, commander, or amir to another. In each of these transfers of power, new blows were dealt to the urban population, to commerce, and to the physical and social fabric of the cities (8, 16, 18).

### Changing Trade Routes

Iranian commerce throughout history has been shaped by developments such as the rise and fall of dynasties, the policies and objectives of rulers, and the character of their societies, all of which influenced the dispersion of population and markets and the layout of trade routes. Given the crucial importance of commercial roads as one of the main pillars of urban growth and development, an examination of cities from the perspective of trade routes reveals their social and economic significance. The passage of caravans, the residence of merchants and travelers, and the intermediary role of cities in exchange and distribution all played a major role in their growth and expansion.

Following the Mongol invasions, although Iran experienced severe economic decline and most cities lost their former prosperity, some urban centers—especially after Ghazan's reforms—began to develop and achieved a measure of economic and social advancement. During this period, northern and central cities acquired particular importance because of their special geographical position and their location along trade routes and commodity-exchange corridors. The passage of several major commercial routes—above all the Silk Road—through these cities led to the creation of large commercial zones and brought prosperity to their urban economies. Under the Mongols, with the selection of Soltaniyeh as the capital, a royal highway was constructed from Hamadan to Soltaniyeh, and Qazvin was inserted into this road network; owing to its central position, it became a nodal point through which major routes passed (5). Mostowfi describes the royal highways radiating from Soltaniyeh, which was then Iran's political and commercial center, as follows: the southern highway, which led to Hamadan and from there to Baghdad and Mecca; the eastern highway, which ran to Qazvin and Varāmīn (near Tehran) and then to Khorasan; the northern highway, which connected Zanjan to Ardabil and the Caucasus; the western highway, which ran from Zanjan to Tabriz and Asia Minor; and the highway between east and south, which through Saveh led to Qom and from there to Isfahan, Shiraz, and the ports of the Persian Gulf (8). Because of Tabriz's importance under the Mongols, the main commercial route from that city ran obliquely across northern Iran toward the east, following the old Silk Road through Khorasan to Samarqand and ultimately to China. Internal overland traffic across the Iranian plateau did not connect directly from the south to Tabriz; rather, it reached Tabriz through several west-east axes passing via Soltaniyeh, Qazvin, Ray, and Nishapur.

Since Soltaniyeh was the Ilkhanid capital, it overshadowed other centers. The port of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf had replaced Siraf, and all maritime traffic between India and the Mediterranean coasts passed through Hormuz. The trade route between Soltaniyeh and Hormuz thus not only formed the north-south axis of domestic commerce in Iran, but in the 14th century also made Iran the nodal point of all overland and maritime trade between Europe and Asia. The collapse of the Ilkhanid Empire gradually diminished Iran's importance in commerce between Europe and the Far East, and Soltaniyeh lost its previous prosperity. Timurid interest shifted toward promoting eastern



commercial centers such as Samarqand and Herat, with little attention to preserving Iran's earlier pivotal role in the east–west trade chain (16).

The evolution and expansion of trade and commerce depended to a considerable extent on the quality and security of the roads, the density of communication networks, and related factors. The degree of urban development was likewise contingent on these conditions; one of the vital necessities for any city was access to a supra-regional communication network.

From this perspective, the existence of organized and centralized states with broad regional capabilities offered the best framework for strengthening and extending domestic trade in Iran. The administrative organs of such a state structure were far more effective than short-lived and unstable local regimes, since they ensured the quality, security, and multiplicity of the infrastructural elements required by the economy. For this reason, even seemingly superficial political changes repeatedly had adverse effects on Iran's commercial life.

Accordingly, cities that attracted Timurid attention and stood along major commercial arteries enjoyed abundance and prosperity, whereas others languished in misery. Most districts of Qazvin and Zanjan became depopulated in this era, although it is said that Zanjan had formerly been one of the largest cities in Iran. At the same time, it must be noted that not all roads were safe at all times from bandits and local highwaymen.

Samarqandī, describing the events of 1386, reports: "News came from Soltaniyeh that the people of Gilan were causing devastation in Qazvin. The sovereign [the Sahib-Qirān] summoned 'Adil Āqā and said that we cannot dispense with the movement of our troops to and from Khorasan, and we have ordered Aykū Tīmūr to secure the road to Gilan" (10). Hāfiẓ-i Abrū, regarding the insecurity of the Soltaniyeh–Qazvin route in 1420–1421, writes: "...It was reported that the son of Amīr Shaykh Hājī 'Irāqī had risen in rebellion in the district of Ṭārom, and for that reason the route between Soltaniyeh and Qazvin had become unsafe" (13).

Trade in the northern regions—from the Ottoman center of Bursa to the Chinese capital Peking—was conducted through routes and cities in Iran. In this period, commercial activity was concentrated on Soltaniyeh, and all silk produced in Gilan along the southern Caspian shore was transported to Soltaniyeh and from there exported to Damascus, other parts of Syria and Anatolia, and the port of Caffa in Crimea (8). By contrast, the route that ran from Samarqand to Soltaniyeh was completely secure. Clavijo describes a caravan of eight hundred camels bringing goods and merchandise from China to Samarqand and notes that the journey to Peking took six months. One of the main reasons for the commercial importance of Samarqand and Soltaniyeh was that these two cities served as the residence and military camp of Timur and of Mīrānshāh, the Timurid governor of western Iran (14). With the later shift of trade routes toward Herat, that city became the principal axis of commercial life in Central Asia, forming the main hub of north–south and east–west trade: between the Golden Horde, Khwarazm, and India on the one hand, and between Anatolia, Ādharbayjān, and the western regions of China on the other (16). The passage of Silk Road branches and the spice route through Herat turned it into one of the leading commercial centers of the then-known world.

### **Growth of Transoxanian Cities as a Result of Timur's Forced Migration Policy**

During the 14th century, the condition of many Iranian cities declined in comparison with earlier periods. Timur rose to power in Transoxiana at a time when urban life there had been in decline for roughly a century and a half under Mongol rule. The Mongol rulers of the Chaghatay ulus long resisted living in cities and adopting urban culture, which contributed to the erosion of urban institutions during their domination.

After eliminating his rivals, Timur chose Samarqand as his capital and seat of government and consolidated the foundations of his power there. By making Samarqand his capital and undertaking new construction projects—especially in the new citadel and in rebuilding the city walls that had been ruined under the Mongols—he took the first steps toward establishing the capital of his state, a city that in a short time became the largest urban center in Transoxiana and Iran. Since Timur was a patron of merchants and traders, and because within the city there was no suitable place in which to store and display goods appropriately, he ordered the construction of a new bazaar to stimulate the city's economy. He commanded that a broad street be laid out to divide Samarqand into two parts and that shops be built on both sides of it, in which every kind of merchandise could be sold. To carry out this plan, he appointed two notable dignitaries and instructed them to work day and night, demolishing houses along the route. Master builders laid out a wide avenue, constructed rows of shops on each side, and placed in front of each shop a stone bench hewn from white slabs. Each shop contained two chambers, a front one for selling and a rear one for storage. Above the street they erected a vaulted and domed roof pierced by windows for illumination. As soon as these structures were completed, merchants hastened to spread out their wares of every type in the shops. Fountains were installed at intervals along the avenue, and a council was formed to oversee the maintenance of the buildings. There was no shortage of labor: as many workers as the master builders required were brought in from outside, and the builders worked in shifts throughout the night—some demolishing houses, others leveling the street, and others constructing the bazaar—so that the entire market was completed within twenty days (14).

A survey of Timur's military campaigns shows that, with each territory conquered in Iran and Transoxiana, he systematically separated large numbers of craftsmen, artisans, and artists and sent them to Transoxiana. This organized transfer occurred in nearly all regions of Iran. After the conquest of Fars, Timur not only deported the great scholar Sayyid Sharīf Jurjānī to Samarqand but also compelled the artisans and craftsmen of the region to migrate with their households to his capital (9). The names of architects and builders from Tabriz and Isfahan indicate that many of the Timurid monuments in Samarqand were the work of these war captives. Yazdī records Timur's order to transfer all artists and craftsmen from Fars and 'Irāq, and similar movements of skilled labor from conquered Khwarazm and Khorasan followed the same pattern (9, 13, 20).

In the *Tuzukāt-i Timūrī* (Timurid Institutes), Timur divides the chief elements of his realm into twelve classes: sayyids, scholars, and learned men in the first class; sages and investigators in the second; men of wisdom in the sixth; viziers, secretaries, and scribes in the seventh; physicians, astronomers, and engineers in the eighth; masters of crafts of all kinds in the eleventh; and merchants and caravan leaders in the twelfth (21). As a steadfast patron of scholars, artists, and craftsmen, Timur sought out men of talent and distinction in all his campaigns and deported them to Samarqand, so that around him there were always numerous masters of every art (9, 10, 14, 16). The urban aristocracy, jurists, scholars, and *ḥuffāz* (Qur'an memorizers) formed another category targeted by this forced migration policy (9). Timur also transferred many artists, craftsmen, and scholars from other conquered lands to Samarqand; for example, Ulugh Beg brought Ghiyāth al-Dīn Jamshīd Kāshānī and Mu'īn al-Dīn from Kashan to his court (10). In this period, the outstanding architectural works and new buildings—both in structural technique and in the elaboration of decorative programs—were largely the result of the efforts of distinguished architects such as Qavām al-Dīn of Shiraz (16). All of this was achieved at the cost of stripping other conquered cities and regions of their human and material capital; the wealth and talent of the subjugated lands flowed inexorably toward Timur's new capital.

Cities located relatively close to the Timurid political core enjoyed better conditions than the central and northern cities of Iran. Nishapur, for instance, was a populous city and regarded as an excellent place to live; the population of Tus exceeded that of all the settlements lying on the route from Soltaniyeh to Tus; and Bukhara was a city of wealthy merchants (14). While residing in Badghis, Shāhrukh ordered the reconstruction and repopulation of Marv, which had been ruined since the Mongol invasion, and charged prominent amirs such as ‘Alā’ al-Dawla ‘Alīka Kakaltāsh, Amīr Mūsā, and Amīr ‘Alī Chaghānī with overseeing the city. People were brought from various regions of the realm and settled there. In addition, Shāhrukh called for public works throughout Khorasan: numerous roads were built, new bridges were constructed, and old bridges were repaired (22).

After Timur’s death, Shāhrukh established Herat as his capital and, continuing his father’s policies, inaugurated a new phase of development there. He built two covered market axes across the city, each beginning at one gate and ending at the opposite gate, and at their intersection he created a grand four-way bazaar (23). The transfer of the Timurid political center to Herat partially diminished Samarqand’s economic prosperity. Although Ulugh Beg in Transoxiana continued to follow Timur’s path, it was Herat that now entered a period of marked economic flourishing.

## Conclusion

The Timurids became a major factor in the stagnation and ruin of many cities and of urban life in central and northern Iran. Although factors such as favorable geographical location, advantageous commercial position and proximity to communication routes, strategic location, and the benefit of natural and military fortifications contributed to urban growth and development, alongside these elements political centrality was of particular importance, since it led to the establishment of administrative institutions, cultural and artistic centers, and the building activities of rulers, grandees, and military commanders. Migration to expanding cities fostered population growth and the spatial enlargement of those urban centers favored by the Timurids, while factors such as changes in road networks, the loss of commercial status and irrigation systems, the decline of agriculture, uprisings by urban and rural populations against local rulers over power, the forced displacement of city dwellers, the loss of political and administrative centrality, and military campaigns together produced stagnation in many cities of central and northern Iran. Internal turmoil, political unrest, and the military campaigns and conflicts between the Timurids and the Qara Qoyunlu Turkmens, as well as the settlement and incursions of Turkmen tribes, inflicted severe damage on these cities, and the added burden of heavy taxation and predatory fiscal practices further deepened the stagnation and decline of central and northern Timurid cities.

Just as in the Ilkhanid period, attention to the promotion of trade and its revenues in the core cities of the Timurid realm generated positive commercial and economic outcomes and brought social, economic, political, and military development to those centers. The existence of thriving markets and large populations in such cities attests to the strengthening and expansion of their urban economies. At the same time, Timur’s focus on the development of his capital and its surrounding cities led to the forced migration of urban scholars and notables, together with merchants, craftsmen, and people of the trades. As a result, cities that had once enjoyed considerable prosperity were marginalized, and indifference to their fate brought about the collapse and withering of social and economic life within them. Cities such as Qazvin, Zanjan, Kerman, Ray, and others were emptied of inhabitants, while northern cities lost their former commercial vitality.

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All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

## Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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