

A Comparative Study of Two Historical Experiences in the Land of Erāq-e-Ajam (Persian Iraq), in Terms of the Place-Based Development

An enclosed and low-lying plain that sits between the local heights of the eastern Zagros and the western edge of the central Iranian desert, named Erāq-e-Ajam. This historical region, which is located in a dead-end, is linked to the main arteries of the country only through local access roads. Thus, the economy and low population of the region have created villages and small towns, and no large city has grown out of macro-economic, political, or religious exchanges. The weaving industry in the region has thrived due to climatic conditions, ancient history, the stabilization of tribes, and the tranquility established by geographical conditions. Animal husbandry, dairy production, and weaving industries have been sustained by rangelands and villages located at long distances from each other due to the dispersion of water resources. The stability and continuity of these conditions made the art and industry of carpet weaving in the region gain recognition. This industry formed the basis of exports from the land of Erāq-e-Ajam. Until the Qajar period, despite the existence of productive infrastructure for the carpet industry and skilled manpower, the market for non-Iraqi products remained limited to domestic markets. In 1186 AH (1223 AH), Fathali Shah Qajar commissioned Yusuf Khan Gorji to use the existing capacities of the region for development by building a new city. The main goal of the program was to generate revenue from the potential resources of the land. Skilled manpower and the chain of inputs that supported the livestock industry, justifying the new organization of the mass production cycle of carpets and their exports. European companies also stepped in for this purpose, and by 1319, Arak was one of the most important carpet exporters to Europe. Before that, it was necessary to establish a suitable base in the middle of a large region with small and scattered settlements to serve as the headquarters of the administrative system and management of the development program. The new city of Sultanabad, with a European map, spatial organization, structure, and elements of an Islamic-Iranian city, centralized investment, and unified management, was built and ready for use in 4 years, covering an area of 50 hectares. After that, European companies entered the carpet export business, and the region faced a great demand for purchase and economic prosperity. The share of producers in the income and the profit of intermediaries is a question for future studies. On the eve of the Constitutional Movement and due to the weakness of the Qajar government in supporting local merchants in confronting foreign companies, it led the marketers of Arak to fight foreign capitalists. Regardless of the management that dominated the program, it can be said that the Qajar approach to the development of non-Arab Iraq was a kind of endogenous development and planning based on the capacities of the system and simultaneous attention to the interests of developers, the program environment, and the local community. In such a way that the growth of one did not hinder the development of others. This method, regardless of the almost certain discrimination in the distribution of benefits, can be considered a good example of place-based development. A development that places a systemic understanding of place, meaning «the reading of the local community from the objective components of the land,» along with the interests of the developer and the land. Two centuries after Sultanabad was established and during the period when its name was changed to Arak, the second development plan of the region was implemented. This period coincided with the era when the North-South National Railway passed through Arak, and the region was no longer at a dead end. The establishment of large industries, disregarding the environmental conditions of the land, a deep and enclosed area among the local highlands, and regardless of the conflict of skills of the local community that had been cultivated in art and weaving for thousands of years, and the shortage of technical labor, was the approach to the second development of Arak. The result of this policy was the mass migration of ethnic groups from other lands to non-Arab Iraq, the unbridled growth of the city of Arak, environmental pollution due to the persistence of toxic air in the greenhouse conditions of the land, and the creation of an economic competitor for the ancient weaving economy of the region. The second development resulted in the collapse of spatial attachments, social disintegration, high housing prices, environmental damage, and weakening of the historical identity of the local community. Although the first development occurred in more primitive historical conditions, it was a better policy than the second development because of its adaptation to the processes governing place-making and place-based development. A development that was defined as result-oriented and based on increasing economic income. The experience of the two development policies in Arak confirms the importance of defining the place of development in planning and achieving development goals. The fact that the development plan is partially defined for nowhere and then the location for its implementation is selected will certainly lead to the destruction of the intergenerational assets of the land. The calendar of hidden costs of this development method confirms the economic failure of the program that was originally called an economic development program. The cover image depicts the present-day boundaries of Markazi Province, centered on Arak, encompassing the core territory of the historical region of Erāq-e-Ajam (Persian Iraq). The historical development of this region was shaped, first and foremost, by its geographical setting, enclosed within mountainous terrain, and secondly by its distance from major transregional communication and trade routes. These factors contributed to a prolonged state of historical and economic isolation. The establishment of the new city of Arak approximately two centuries ago, based on a European urban plan, marked the beginning of a systematic effort to capitalize on the region's long-standing potential in textile production. This policy proved to be notably successful. In the contemporary period, however, outward-oriented patterns of development, largely disconnected from local capacities and historical endowments, undermined the accumulated achievements of centuries. In their place, a new model of economic development—dependent upon external capital and resources—was introduced into the region, the adverse consequences of which continue to persist.

Director-in-Charge
Seyed Amir Mansouri
amansoor@ut.ac.ir

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