

RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES AND RADICAL SPATIAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN HISTORIC URBAN LANDSCAPES

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1. Introduction

In the traditional system of urbanization in Iran, the historic quarters represent geographical, social and cultural units that are distinguished by different characteristics, such as ethnicity, religion, and economics [1, 2]. However, through the years, the changes that have taken place in these quarters have affected the emergence, development, and identity of many historic Iranian cities [3]. In the contemporary era, the lack of attention to the participation of citizens in urban planning and to the preservation of tangible and intangible cultural heritage in Iran has led to the decline of historical and cultural values in many of these quarters and posed a severe challenge to the identity of historic cities on a broader scale [4]. One of these differences can be addressed in terms of religion. Today religious diversity is a social fact in most countries around the world. Although reports on the impact of religious diversity on European and North American countries are appropriately known, religious diversities and the approach to their management is unclear in South Asian countries, e.g. in Iran [5].

According to Article 13, the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are considered as religious minorities who are free to practice their religion under the conditions of the constitution and act in their status and religious education according to their religious beliefs [6]. Although no official statistics are available on the number of Zoroastrian, Jewish and Christian citizens in Iran, Robert Bablerin, the representative of south Armenians in the seventh, eighth and ninth Islamic Consultative Assembly, estimates the number of Armenian citizens in Iran to be between 50-60 thousand and claims that the number of Iranian-Armenians was about 250 thousand before the Islamic Revolution in 1978. On the other hand, Robert Safarian, a documentary filmmaker and reviewer, wrote in a blog post that “according to the statistics after the Islamic Revolution, the number of Armenians decreased to 20% in Iran (of which a significant number of people were preparing for immigration); it means that 80% of Iranian-Armenians have left Iran [7]. On the one hand, it is claimed that

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there is a kind of peaceful coexistence between religious minorities and the Muslim community in Iran; on the other, it is said that this coexistence has led to a disrespect for the fundamental rights of religious minorities in Iran.

In this study on the differences between religious government and religious minorities and its impact on the spatial structure of historical quarters and religious ghettos, the research method is based on the historic urban landscape approach. In this approach, the preservation of cultural heritage goes beyond physical characteristics and focuses on the entire human environment with its tangible and intangible features. This approach considers intangible heritage, cultural diversity, socio-economic factors, and local community values to promote sustainability in the planning and preservation of cultural heritage [8–11]. We examine how religious conflicts have caused spatial and destructive changes in the historic landscape by choosing the Armenian quarter in Isfahan (Julfa) where undesirable and unsustainable social and physical development has taken place during the contemporary era. Aimed at improving preservation policies, the study reveals why applying the federalism model in heritage planning is essential for the sustainability of the religious quarters in Iran.

2. Theoretical framework

Religious heritage and sacred sites have received particular attention by ICCROM, ICOMOS, and UNESCO since 2003 [12], as well as by scientific literature linked to a complete and valuable world heritage with inclusive common values [13, 14]. In the last few years, the issue of an integrated strategy has emerged concerning cultural heritage, recommending guidelines for the management of sites of religious interest with the involvement of civil and religious authorities at every level [15]. Unlike other countries with a variety of minorities, only religious minorities are identified in Iran due to the religious government. Thus, different ethnicities, races, and languages are not considered minorities [16, 17]. Religious minorities refer to groups whose religion is not recognized as the official religion of a country, or the majority of people have not joined it. Logically, a religious minority does not exist without people who practice their religious rituals [18].

According to Article 6 (right of political participation) in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which considers the administration of Iran based on the votes of the people, it is found that the right of minorities to political participation in the election of Iranian officials and authorities is similar to the majority of Muslims. This equal right of minority groups is better realized when Article 64 (right to elect a representative) of the constitution stipulates that each minority of Zoroastrians, Jews, Assyrian, Chaldean Christians, and Armenian Christians can elect a representative in the Islamic Consultative Assembly. Although Articles 13 and 19 of the constitution recognize the rights of religious minorities [6], the restrictions on individual and social freedoms are the most critical reasons for religious minorities in Iran [7].

Religion was one of the primary motivations for societies to create legacies such as cathedrals, art and music, carnivals and handicrafts [17, 18]. From the historical perspective, the sustainable development of historic sites is achieved not only by the preservation of their physical form but also by the recognition of all dynamic forces shaping their culture and community [10, 21, 22]. Besides, many theorists have emphasized the need for the participation of the local community to determine values

and formulate a program for the preservation of cultural heritage [10, 23–26]. For example, the values and meanings of historic sites are more recognizable in the vision of individuals and the local community than in the place itself [27, 28]. Thus, with the loss of the authentic local community as the heritage owners and their replacement with another group, the future of historic monuments in Iran, especially in the minority regions, is seriously threatened [29].

Nevertheless, some studies have used the model of federalism as a tool to strengthen national unity and preserve minorities [30]. Johannes Althusius, the first federalist theorist, believed that federalism is a realized form of post-feudal states based on the constitution, autonomy and possible freedom of groups as well as their participation in the formation of an extensive collection [31]. A prototype of such an experience was initiated through the formation of the United States, which included a new alliance based on citizens, not cities. The founders of federalism in the United States tried to create new and more efficient institutions with insignificant power so that local governments would not be deprived of their authority. This implied attention to the duality of the local community and national community [32]. In the federal system, two contradictory trends are reconciled: first, the interest in the maintenance of autonomy and legal personality by independent states; and second, the tendency towards the formation of a new power encompassing all community members. Hence, the federal government is composed of small governments that want to remain autonomous, while they intentionally give a significant part of their political sovereignty to the central government and cooperate in the realization of the ruling will in the federal country [33]. Federalism should not be considered as a universal model that can be applied in all countries. However, it is influenced by the diverse political conditions of each country in seeking a midpoint between two extreme conditions, the extended state and the Confederate state [34].

3. Research methodology

This research aims to reveal the contradictory relationship between the religious government and religious minorities in the emergence of spatial transformations within historic quarters by selecting the historic Armenian quarter in Isfahan (Julfa) as the research case study. At first, all data relating to the spatial transformations that have taken place and have been observed in this quarter during the contemporary era was collected through literature review and field investigations. Then, logical reasoning was applied to find out how religious conflicts have played a part in the decline of physical and cultural values in Julfa and today pose a threat to the preservation of the historic site. Aimed at improving preservation policies, this study finally explains how applying the model of federalism in heritage planning can solve the problem of religious differences and enhances the sustainability of historic sites in Iran.

The Julfa of Isfahan was established outside the city by Armenians in 1618 during the Islamic sovereignty of the Safavid dynasty in Iran. From the historical perspective, this quarter reminds us of the obligatory migration of the residents of Julfa, near the Aras River, and their settlement in Isfahan in 1605 [35–37]. The population of Julfa subsequently increased through the construction of beautiful houses and churches until the end of the Safavid dynasty in Iran (1722), so that Julfa became a distinctive quarter in Isfahan in terms of ethnicity, religion, and dialect (Figure 1).

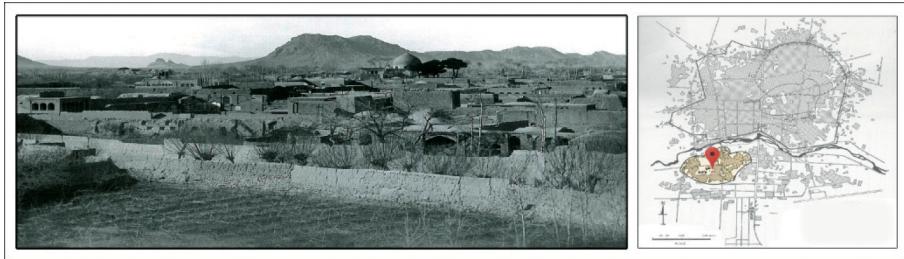


Figure 1. Julfa landscape before the contemporary era [38].

Although the Julfa quarter has been integrated into Isfahan city and resembles other quarters in the contemporary era due to rapid urban growth (Figure 2), a few historic buildings and public spaces have remained there. According to the current divisions in Isfahan city, the historic quarter of Julfa is located in district number five.



Figure 2. Julfa – the historic quarter in the contemporary era.

4. Data Analysis

The imposition of comprehensive development plans has resulted in substantial spatial transformations in the historic urban landscape. In these plans, which are prepared and implemented as an unwary imitation of western models, the physical, cultural, and social values of historic landscapes have been ignored. The first development plan for Isfahan was implemented in 1958, in which the transformation of the urban road network was a critical dimension. Figure 3 shows how a road that was 36 meters in width split the Julfa quarter into two east and west parts. Given the first comprehensive plan for Isfahan in 1971 and the second comprehensive plan for Isfahan in 1988, this pattern has continued to be applied similarly to all districts in the city for six decades.

The analysis of the master plans showed that several factors have contributed to their inefficiency, including a current top-down approach in urban planning, such as a lack of funding, incorrect understanding of the problems and limited involvement of citizens in the planning process. Indeed, urban management in Iran, as a government-

dependent set, has not yet shown any tendency to change its attitude and utilize a bottom-up pattern in urban planning, particularly in historic landscapes and religious sites.

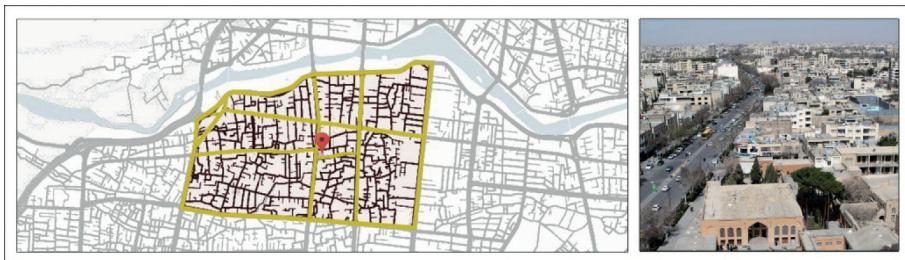


Figure 3. Fragmentation of Julfa after the first master plan for Isfahan.

According to the historians who traveled to Isfahan during the Safavid dynasty (1501-1736) [39], e.g. Pietro Della Valle and Jean Chardin, it can be said that religious minorities had particular liberty in the past and even followed the religion and laws of their homeland [40, 41]. Such integrity and solidarity without any involvement of government officials provided a basis for the participation of minorities in the management of urban quarters. A picture by Ernst Hoeltzer (Figure 4) taken in 1897 shows the Armenian minorities celebrating Easter in Jolfa, Isfahan.

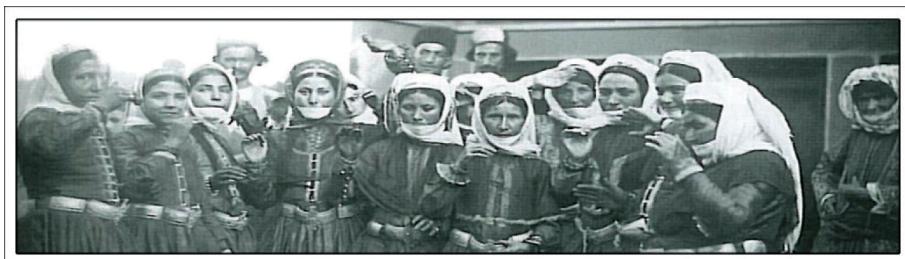


Figure 4. Armenian women dancing in the Easter festival in Julfa, Isfahan [38].

As the realm of historic landscape disappeared under the influence of the top-down management approach, a mixed social structure was created that contradicted the religious and ethnic foundation of Julfa. This transformation was followed by a wave of new urban populations, often Muslims, who settled in the quarter and changed Julfa from a purely Armenian quarter. With the disappearance of the historic landscape under the influence of the top-down management approach, a mixed social structure was created, which ran counter to Julfa's religious and ethnic foundation. Due to this change, a wave of the city's new population, mostly Muslims, settled there and made Julfa a mixed-religious quarter. Although comprehensive plans have been effective in eliminating the historic borders of Julfa, the role of urban planners in supporting Armenian social centers has been criticized in view of the growing number of mosques and religious centers established in the Armenian quarter over the last forty years [29] (Figure 5).

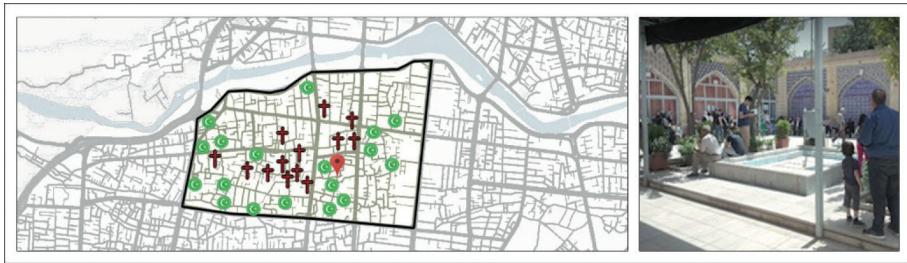


Figure 5. Mosques and Islamic centers in Julfa, the Armenian quarter

In Iran, the centrality of the religious-political system causes official rituals to be held in the public zone of cities in support of the government. Figure 6 shows how the increased population of Muslims and their religious centers in the Armenian quarter has led to the transfer of their rituals to the public zone of Julfa. At the same time, Armenian minorities are not allowed to perform any religious activities or hold any kind of cultural festival at the public level and are required to follow Islamic laws completely, violating Article 13 and 19 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.



Figure 6. Muslim rituals held in the streets of Julfa

After the Islamic revolution in Iran, the socio-economic activities of religious minorities were restricted [42, 43], and consequently, the Christian community significantly decreased in Isfahan as a result of immigration. Lack of equal opportunities and social freedom can be regarded as one of the most important reasons in such a process. Although there is no legal restriction on the employment of religious minorities in any organization according to Article 28 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it is not possible to employ religious minorities in many state institutions, as declared by the former Zoroastrian representative in the Islamic Consultative Assembly. Such social discrimination, not in the constitution but in law enforcement, has greatly influenced the transformation of the social structure of historic landscapes for minorities. Given the changes in social structure, the process of physical transformation has been accelerated in Julfa, destroying the spatial integration in this historic landscape. The construction of several modern commercial complexes along with high-rise residential buildings has changed the appearance of Julfa from a historical-cultural landscape to a

commercial-economic pole (Figure 7). Consequently, it can be deduced that the harsh economic conditions of the religious minorities have caused the Armenians' estates and properties to be exploited by capitalists who benefit from the economic disadvantage of the local community.

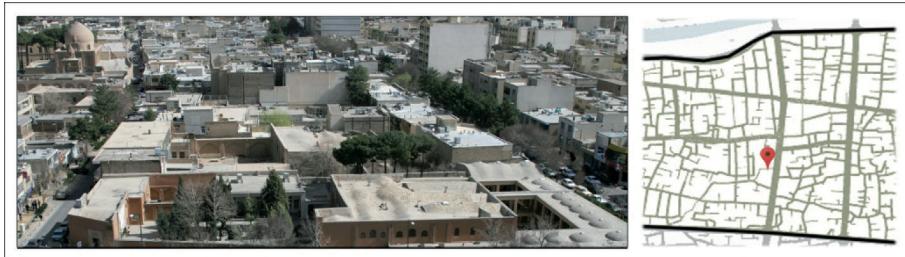


Figure 7. Modernization and high-rise construction in the historic Armenian quarter

The social and economic discrimination over the past four decades in this quarter has, therefore, accelerated physical transformations in the historic landscape, a fact which has often been aligned with religion. Thus, preserving Julfa's historic landscape as part of the national heritage faces a great many difficulties. Figure 8 represents the monuments that have survived in the quarter. These buildings consist of Armenian churches, schools, and historic houses that date back to about 400 years ago.

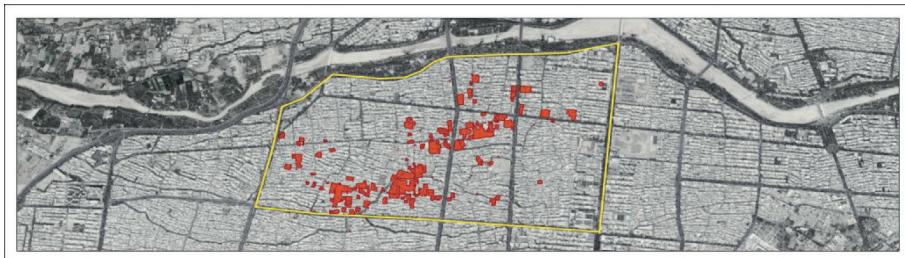


Figure 8. Remaining valuable historic monuments in Julfa

5. Discussion

In the perception of historic urban landscapes, it should be noted that such environments are not created only by a set of connected historical buildings [44], but as a result of dynamic social, economic and cultural forces that create the form of historic urban landscapes [9]. In this view, the constant participation of citizens and their role in the planning process and preservation of tangible and intangible cultural heritage are highly emphasized. This participation is formed at different levels and is effective in recognizing the dynamic forces that shape historic urban landscapes [8, 23, 24]. Implementing this type of approach could undoubtedly be realized in a participatory and bottom-up planning system [45].

In Iran, however, the urban management system runs a top-down government-based model for the development of cities, an approach that has become evident through the implementation of comprehensive plans over a period of six decades. These plans were applied to historic landscapes without recognizing their cultural and social values, in addition to the fact that the manner and level of participation of the local community have been ambiguous. As mentioned previously, historic landscapes in Iran include geographic units with ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities. The ambiguity of their participation takes on more significance when considering that the minorities in the local community not only had no role in the development of the landscapes but were also forced to adapt, leave or migrate due to the plans and radical changes that were adopted and applied. The loss of genuine local communities as the owners of the heritage and their replacement with other groups seriously threaten the future of historic landscapes in Iran, especially in the ghettos.

Religious minorities are not allowed to hold many of their festivals in Iran due to the religious structure of the government, causing the disappearance of intangible heritage within these landscapes. On the other hand, the implementation of many preservation plans is also either brought to a halt or fail completely because of the top-down urban management system [29]. Therefore, in the present structure, a solution may be to refer to the constitution and utilize the capacities that facilitate the preservation and development of landscapes for minorities throughout the country.

The law of "State and Provincial Associations" of 1946 can be mentioned in this regard. The law is aimed at the decentralization and assignment of affairs. It means that the rulers are prevented from waywardness and the affairs are delegated to the people. Therefore, decentralization is essential in the urban management structure because it promotes the participation of the people and provides a basis for dialogue. Today, the model of federalism is indicated as the structure and process of "cooperation as a result of dialogue" on common issues and programs. In this approach, all the constituent units are invited to dialogue in order to conclude with a final consensus-based agreement. Consequently, federalism seeks to strike a balance among different communities, values, interests, and beliefs (e.g., religious beliefs) through the same relationships.

However, it should be noted that the adoption of any model must be in accordance with the social, historical and economic conditions of each country and that the levels of power assigned to local communities based on these factors must be adjusted, based on the implementation of federalism and the administration of territorial affairs. Applying a model of federalism represents an attempt to decentralize and delegate affairs to local and minority levels in the field of urban management. In other words, federalism can be considered as a process that takes shape in a mutual interaction between urban management and the local minority community. This approach theoretically and practically emphasizes the utilization of existing capacities in local contexts for the preservation and development of historic urban landscapes. Also, the application of federalism in the urban management system above all requires the coherence and integration of the inhabitants within a neighborhood community as well as promoting the identification of neighborhood bases and contexts. Local institutions, non-profit organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) are the key factors in this type of attitude. This approach cannot be achieved without the establishment of these institutions. Indeed, the restriction of government ownership and assignment of affairs to the private sector do not improve the situation in the absence of such factors,

but it may create another major crisis in the preservation of historic landscapes. So, before the decentralization and reduction of government ownership, it is important to ensure the consolidation and expansion of the public domain.

Therefore, it is first necessary to change policy-making at the national level based on decentralization, and then, by delegating the power to local communities, and in particular, to the minorities, there should be a structural transformation from top-down planning to participatory planning. Given that social and human capital play a significant role in the federal structure, historic urban landscapes can also be a prime location for the realization of this model. The experience of implementing comprehensive urban plans over six decades in Iran reveals that social capital is not formed in the centralized planning-structures based on traditional management views and can cause radical spatial changes in urban landscapes for minorities. According to the discussions in this study, the problem of preserving historic urban landscapes in Iran, as part of the tangible and intangible national heritage, could be solved using the model of federalism at the national legislation level, and may ultimately lead to social freedom for religious minorities. It could, moreover, encourage the participation of minority communities in the preservation of the historic landscapes through a bottom-up process. Fundamentally, there are strong justifications for the adoption of a federal or community-based approach due to a variety of planning, design, management, political and economic reasons, and its scientific and theoretical credibility is adequately supported by the opinions of several researchers [32–34, 46]

6. Conclusion

Historic quarters have been one of the identifying factors of historic cities in Iran. Given that these quarters were distinguished by different characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, and economics, many of them are now exposed to unfavorable development and have unsustainable social conditions. Julfa of Isfahan, where Armenian minorities have lived for about 400 years, is one of these landscapes which has undergone radical spatial changes due to the imposition of comprehensive plans over six decades; this means that it is now transforming from a historic-cultural landscape into a modern and heterogeneous urban zone. The religion-based political structure of the government has caused the Muslim majority to deteriorate the original identity of this historic landscape through the construction of mosques and the celebration of their rituals after settling in Julfa. Although the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran recognizes the freedom of religious minorities to hold their cultural or religious festivals, the lack of legal capacities has led to the migration of religious minorities because of social discrimination. The combination of these factors along with the top-down urban planning system and the vague definition of participation of the local community has resulted in the failure of plans to preserve historic landscapes in Iran. Therefore, given the different levels of minorities in terms of religion, ethnicity, language, and culture, the application of the model of federalism may be evaluated as a constructive factor to fill the gap between the constitution and the method of law enforcement. Many studies have evaluated the model as a decisive factor in achieving territorial justice. However, it should be noted that in this model, the levels of delegation of authority must be based on historical, cultural and national traits. Its application can provide minorities with social rights, on the one hand, and encourage them to participate in the planning

process, on the other. It is worth mentioning that local institutions, NGOs and CBOs are crucial factors in the realization of this approach. Indeed, the total elimination of government ownership and delegation of affairs to minority communities will not help to improve the preservation of historic landscapes, if these institutions are absent, but maybe the source of critical religious strife. Therefore, adopting a model of federalism as a solution to the current problem of preserving historical quarters and cities in Iran needs to be concerned with the cultural features of society, and a reduction in government authority, which should be done gradually, in several phases, in order to prevent the occurrence of religious conflict.

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Biographical notes

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Summary

Historic quarters have been a significant component in creating the identity of historical cities in Iran. In the contemporary era, many of these historic landscapes have faced the collapse of their traditional and social foundations and been subjected to the degradation of their cultural, social and physical values. Given the dominant role of religion in the orientation of the political system in Iran, this article examines how religious differences have created significant spatial transformations in historic urban landscapes for religious minorities. Selecting the historic Armenian quarter in Isfahan (Julfa) as the case study, a new model for the preservation of historic landscapes in ghettos on a national scale has been proposed after having carried out the relevant research. Given the capacities in the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the find-

ings of this research show that the model of federalism, if integrated into public policy, can promote the social freedom and rights of religious minorities in Iran by increasing the participation of local community and consequently, result in the sustainability of historic urban landscapes in the planning process.

Riassunto

I quartieri storici in Iran sono gli ambiti urbani dove storicamente si è creata maggiore identità e senso di appartenenza comunitaria. Nella contemporaneità diversi quartieri storici hanno fatto i conti con il venir meno delle tradizionali basi sociali ed economiche che ne determinavano la loro permanenza, tanto da essere pervasi da varie forme di degrado che stanno mettendo a rischio i loro valori culturali, sociali e fisici. Il degrado è anche legato al prevalere di orientamenti religiosi e, considerato il ruolo dominante della religione nell'orientamento del sistema politico in Iran, questo aspetto è di primaria importanza. L'articolo si interroga proprio su questo, cioè come le differenze religiose stanno generando significative trasformazioni spaziali nei quartieri storici, specialmente in quelli abitati da minoranze religiose. Studiando il caso del quartiere storico Armeno di Isfahan (Julfa), il contributo arriva a proporre un nuovo modello di policy locale per la conservazione dei numerosi quartieri storici presenti in Iran. Il nuovo modello, muovendosi all'interno delle norme sul federalismo contenute nella Costituzione della Repubblica Islamica di Iran, presuppone una nuova azione di pianificazione pubblica locale fondata sulla partecipazione attiva delle comunità presenti che, abitando ancora le aree storiche locali, preservi anche le libertà sociali e i diritti delle minoranze religiose.