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City profile

## Sanandaj, Iran

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### ABSTRACT

This article provides a comprehensive insight into the urban development of the city of Sanandaj, the capital of the Kurdistan province in Iran, in response to a clear need for consolidating the scarce formal literature and local documentation on the city. A descriptive-analytical framework is applied to address the various stages of historical, spatial and social change of Sanandaj. A number of particular stages can be discerned, which range from the early establishment as a citadel to the current emergence of different layers of urban space, all of which are associated with particular drivers and barriers to development. The recent urban growth pattern is caused by a combination of rapid population growth, the heterogeneous topography, and unorganized land administration, which results in ribbon growth along arterial roads, vertical development, and clustered-fragmented built-up areas adjacent to pre-existing rural settlements in the periphery of the city. Most of these growths are informal settlements that occupy former agricultural land, often along riparian buffer zones. This causes numerous social issues such as segregation of low income groups, and growing regional inequality. The proposed review of the fundamental structure of the city could contribute to fostering a clearer vision on the future urban development, to cope with marginalization and inequality in newly developed quarters, and to combating the obvious decay in the historical parts of the city.

### 1. Introduction

The administrative borders of Sanandaj (or Senah in Kurdish), the capital of the Kurdistan Province in the West of Iran, contain 3688.6 ha, an area that was home to 373,987 residents in 2011. From a climatological perspective, the city is located in the semi-arid Mediterranean zone (Hanafi & Hatami, 2009), which is characterized by prominent seasonal variations including long freezing periods in winter and warm summers (Sharifi et al., 2009), and an average annual precipitation of about 500 mm (Abadi & Hanafi, 2014). Sanandaj has a heterogeneous geomorphology due to its location in the Zagros mountain chain (Ibrahim, Mushatat, & Abdelmonem, 2015).

With respect to the earliest stages of development, Sanandaj has only limitedly been the subject of comprehensive studies, mainly because of its geographical and political isolation from the centre of Iran. Consequently, this lack of comprehensive sources and written history causes a number of knowledge gaps, which impede a clear understanding of the historical evolution of the city. Indeed, interest from scholars into different topics related to the city has only recently emerged, although this resulted in not more than a few scientific topical studies (Alizadeh & Lahourpour, 2008; Mohammady, Delavar, & Pijanowski, 2013).

Therefore, we want to add to the existing general insights by

consolidating the limitedly available information within a descriptive-analytical framework. To this end, we will emphasize the process of formation of the city and demonstrate how geomorphological characteristics have moulded urban growth patterns from the earliest stages of development onwards, after which we will distinguish the various components of current urban growth. Additionally, the current paper will present an overview of the urban planning policies and spatial plans that have guided the city's development from an ancient citadel into the current capital of the province of Kurdistan (Fanni, 2006). However, providing a complete review of the city's history is out of the scope of the current paper (Table 1).

The main reason why an analysis of Sanandaj's urban development might be of interest to an international readership is the presence of a number of particularly problematic issues, mainly caused by the tremendous pressure of rapid urban expansion, a dramatic population increase, important inward migration from rural areas, emerging social segregation, and growing regional inequality. Apart from this, we argue that analyzing this city's profile could trigger the emergence of related research on Iran's recent history of development, possibly extending the proposed methodology towards chronicles of other Iranian medium sized cities that experienced similarly agitated episodes. Overall, this paper wants to contribute to advancing the understanding of urban

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**Table 1**

Chronological overview of detached cluster development. Source: Department of Roads and Urban Planning of Sanandaj Report (2016), <http://news.mrud.ir/news/21953/>.

Detached cluster development		Hasan Abad	Grezeh	Naysar	Nanaleh
Population based on census	2006	7514	1433	1248	4214
	2011	11,693	3564	26,242	6831
Population based on Detailed Plan	2011	9820	1881	17,673	5215
	forecast for 2021	14,960	2705	25,275	6921
Distance to the city (m)	1976	5950	5020	6330	4540
	2006	800	200	1800	1560
Developed area (ha)	1976	7.11	1.57	4.92	2.05
	2006	146.28	18.77	257.64	45.9
	2011	175.3	28.4	342.42	58.4
Land use changes around the boundary of the cluster (ha)	2009	208.44	290.35	143.53	94.02

formation that may be of use for future research concerning urban planning in remote areas of emerging economies. The next five sections of the paper cover the consecutive stages of development of the city under particular social and environmental circumstances, and political and economic change, in which key elements of the physical expansion of the city will be emphasized. We will conclude the paper with an overview of the current planning tools and urban development issues. Eventually, it should be noted that the intricate interrelationships between these factors resulted in unique urban landscapes with their own, very particular, development patterns (Jawarneh, Julian, & Lookingbill, 2015).

## 2. Origin and early history of foundation

Regarding the city's early history and foundation, there is a strong divergence between historical documentation and archaeological surveys of the built environment. In this respect, we consider a stage before, and a stage after the Mongol invasion of 1259 CE.

### 2.1. From the pre-Islamic era to the Mongol invasion of 1259 CE

The era from 3000 BCE to 600 BCE was a period of unrest, caused by tensions with neighbouring regions (Ibrahim et al., 2015). This resulted in the establishment of sparse settlements on the hillsides that were made inaccessible to invaders and were called 'mound-cities'. After the conquest of the Medes over the Assyrian Empire in 612 BCE, the cores of the subsequently emerging cities were established in the plains (Ardalan, 1833; Mardukh, 1972; James, 1836). Historical records do not mention any specific traces on the site of Sanandaj. However, within 5 km to the southwest of Sanandaj, ancient relics from more than three thousand years were found frequently. Since the advent of the Islam, the presence of graves of a number of Muslim luminaries highlights the importance of the city during the Islamic empire. Indeed, imams usually settled in or travelled through important and populated settlements in order to offer guidance to the people in terms of religion (Alizadeh, 2005). Therefore, it is likely that the city was inhabited until the 13th century Mongol invasion.

### 2.2. From the Mongol invasion up to the Safavid dynasty

The intrusion of the Mongols in 13th century Iran caused the collapse of many cities in terms of government administration, security and stability. Since cities were both rare and small in that era, the majority of the population of Kurdistan appears having been nomadic and rural, maintaining self-catering economies that were governed by local rulers (Mardukh, 1972). However, hostilities from neighbouring tribes induced the establishment of a new type of settlement that was

usually located in inaccessible slopes of the Zagros Mountains (Alizadeh, 2005), recalling the old concept of the mound-city from earlier times of the Median Empire. Therefore, after the Mongol invasion, the Ardalan family demarcated its territories between the Safavid and Ottoman Empire frontiers by means of multiple mobile mound-capitals. These were meant to strengthen the rulers' power by controlling the whole region independently, regardless of changing seasons or the absence of any active central city in the region. According to local chronicles, each citadel contained the main elements of the traditional Islamic town including a bazaar, a mosque and a Hammam (bath house) (Alizadeh & Lahourpour, 2008). The Hasan Abad citadel as a summer residence, located on the hillside of Abidar five kilometres out of Sanandaj centre, was the main fortress.

## 3. Foundation of the city core in the Safavid era

For centuries, Kurdistan was a battle field of military invasions, raids, and destruction caused by rivalry and political tensions between the Persian and Ottoman empires (Ibrahim et al., 2015). Eventually, the new Ottoman–Persian frontiers were defined by the Treaty of Zuhab in 1639, which led to the division of Kurdistan, which ceased to exist as one entity. After the Ottomans withdrew from the Iranian part of Kurdistan, the Safavid dynasty re-established their control over the area. Furthermore, this change of rule was accompanied with a great reform of land policies, which was meant to serve absolutism and centralization (Alizadeh, 2005).

The difficult accessibility of the mound-cities, and the independent status of the Iranian part of Kurdistan that was ruled by the Ardalan family, seemed to be unbearable to king Shah Abbas. Consequently, he conquered the territory, and ordered Sulaiman-Khan Ardalan to destroy the mobile mound-capitals and permanently move their capital to the plains in 1667 CE. Due to several centuries' experience and awareness of maintaining the security and independence of mound-cities, the core of the city was again settled on top of a hill, nearby a village named Senah, in order to overlook the surrounding valley plains. Clearly, the town was founded based on the political and military importance of the location (Mardukh, 1972), which exceeded its economic or administrative importance. The relocation of the capital created a strong bulwark against the Safavid rivalry, and reduced the semi-independence of Kurdistan to a dependent local government through the appointment of local representatives, which was meant to gradually Iranize the Kurdish people (Alizadeh, 2005). The first large-scale town extension of Sanandaj was built for about eight thousand people, structured into two layers of enclosures surrounding the citadel on the top of the hill. In this early stage of settlement, the geomorphology played a primary role in the process of land development. After the construction of the citadel, the second phase was focused on the centre of power, accommodating the noblemen (Mayan-Qala). This neighbourhood around the citadel was walled by squared ramparts containing four gates, looking out into the main directions. Other urban elements were built around the second wall, such as a bazaar, a central mosque, public baths, a school, a bridge and a range of aqueducts (Qanats) for water supply (Alizadeh, 2005), all in accordance with the organization of Islamic urban spaces elsewhere (Madanipour, 2006; Parizadi, 2012).

The location of each quarter was determined by the presence of a particular urban function. In that respect, the quarter of servants was adjacent and well connected to the noblemen's quarter in the north (Jawrabad), while the rectangular bazaar complex, surrounded by the compact merchants' neighbourhoods (Bazaar or Aqa-Zaman) was directly overlooking the eastern part of the city. The quarter of hauliers (Qatarchyan) was located west of the centre, on the opposing Dara Bayan river bank. All these quarters remained unprotected by any walls themselves (Alizadeh, 2005). The structure of the city reflected the social stratification of the semi-feudal community, which was ruled by only one local decision-maker. This clearly explains the subdivision of the city into four main quarters (Meshkini, Habibi, & Alizade, 2010).

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