

City Profiles

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Vision for khorramabad's development: from current challenges to future strategies

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Abstract

Khorramabad, as the capital of Lorestan Province and a mid-sized city in the Zagros region, despite its strategic geographical position and rich natural and cultural assets, faces significant obstacles on the path toward sustainable development. Its location along the north-south corridor of Iran and its proximity to the provinces of Hamedan and Kermanshah provide the city with unique regional connectivity. However, institutional, economic, and spatial challenges have hindered the realization of these potentials. This study develops an Urban Profile of Khorramabad, employing an analytical descriptive approach and statistical data, as well as urban planning documents and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that rapid population growth, unbalanced spatial expansion, weak municipal finance, managerial instability, and underutilization of cultural and natural resources constitute the main barriers to the city's development. Historical evidence further suggests that external pressures and unstable institutional decisions have contributed to the persistence of underdevelopment. The critical analysis highlights that reforming institutional and financial structures, enhancing transparency and accountability in urban management, strengthening networked governance, and leveraging regional linkages could redefine Khorramabad's future development trajectory. Accordingly, the Urban Profile of Khorramabad provides a comprehensive picture of the city's challenges and opportunities, emphasizing the urgent need for integrated and sustainable planning to enhance its role within the national urban network.

Keywords

Intermediate Cities
Khorramabad
Sustainable Development
Urban Governance
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Urban Profile

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, intermediate cities have played a strategic role as intermediary links between metropolises and peripheral areas in fostering spatial equilibrium, sustainable development, and mitigating population concentration (Ren et al., 2024; Ondoš et al., 2025). The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) recommends the adoption of urban profiles as a systematic tool for collecting data, analyzing capacities and challenges, and supporting evidence-based decision-making (Dahiya et al., 2010). However, in Iran, limited experience exists in employing this instrument, and intermediate cities, despite their strategic significance, have been infrequently examined within a comprehensive and interdisciplinary analytical framework (Khodaei & Teimouri, 2018; Khosravi et al., 2024).

Khorramabad, as the capital of Lorestan Province and a prominent example of Iran's intermediate cities, is situated in the north-south corridor and at the heart of the Zagros mountain range. Its strategic location, abundant natural resources such as 13.5 billion cubic meters of annual runoff (Rahimiyekta et al., 2024), production capacity exceeding three million tons of agricultural and livestock products (Shakarmi, 2023), and invaluable cultural heritage including 505 nationally registered monuments and the UNESCO-listed prehistoric caves of Khorramabad Valley (UNESCO, 2025) have conferred a distinctive status upon the city. Notwithstanding these assets, several challenges have constrained its trajectory toward sustainable development, encompassing unemployment rates higher than the national average (Statistical Center of Iran, 2025; YafteNews, 2025a), deterioration of educational infrastructure (Roumani et al., 2017), reliance on unsustainable revenue streams such as building permits (Beyranvandezadeh et al., 2010; ISNA, 2025a), institutional misalignment and deficient financial transparency (Karimi et al., 2019), and environmental issues such as pollution of the Khorram River (Yousefzadeh et al., 2014).

Prior studies on Khorramabad have predominantly addressed disparate topics, such as urban poverty (Khodaei & Teimouri, 2018), informal settlements (Khosravi et al., 2024), or the historical evolution of urban development (Mahjour & Eslamiansab, 2014),

while lacking a comprehensive and integrated analysis of the city's physical, environmental, economic, institutional, and social dimensions. This research primarily aims to address this knowledge gap by formulating an integrated Urban Profile for Khorramabad, which, grounded in an interdisciplinary approach, provides a coherent picture of the challenges and opportunities for sustainable development in this intermediate city. By synthesizing quantitative and qualitative data, this study not only identifies Khorramabad's latent capacities but also offers strategies to redefine its role within Iran's urban network.

This study employs a descriptive-analytical approach. Data were gathered from three sources: 1) official statistics from the Statistical Center of Iran (Statistical Center of Iran, 2025); 2) upstream urban documents, such as the Khorramabad Comprehensive Plan and regional development reports (Salehi, 2023); and 3) semi-structured interviews with seven local stakeholders, including executive managers, sectoral experts, and social and media activists, conducted in September 2025. The mixed-methods approach was employed, as the analysis of intermediate cities necessitates an understanding of institutional contexts and informal urban governance processes beyond mere statistical indicators, which are not fully discernible through official data alone. Interviewees were selected via purposive sampling based on "institutional diversity." Informed consent was secured before the interviews, and participants consented to the disclosure of their names. Interviews continued until "thematic saturation" was achieved; no novel themes emerged after the fifth interview, and the seventh was conducted to ensure the consistency of the themes.

Qualitative data analysis was conducted using Thematic Analysis. Interview transcripts were reread iteratively and open-coded, and similar codes were categorized into sub-themes and main themes. Two researchers reviewed the results to add credibility and ensure consensus (Table 1). To enhance validity and reliability, triangulation was employed across quantitative data, interviews, and secondary sources, such as media reports.

Table 1. Main and sub-themes extracted from interview analysis

| Main Theme | Sub-Themes | Brief Description |
|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| Urban Management Weakness | Frequent managerial changes; Institutional misalignment; Non-specialized appointments; Lack of financial transparency | Managerial instability and lack of expertise in decision-making lead to the inefficiency of urban policies. |
| Financial Challenges | Dependence on unsustainable revenues; Budget shortages; Low tax collection | Unsustainable municipal revenue and low tax collection hinder the realization of sustainable infrastructure programs. |
| Environmental Problems | Khorram River pollution; Oak forest degradation; Poor runoff management | Environmental crises threaten public health and the sustainability of natural resources. |
| Infrastructure Challenges | Linear city structure; Incomplete projects; Illegal constructions | Weak physical and infrastructural structure exacerbate traffic congestion and unbalanced urban development. |
| Development Potentials | Cultural tourism; Agriculture and livestock; Strategic location | Cultural, agricultural, and connectivity capacities can serve as engines for sustainable development. |
| Social and Educational Challenges | Deterioration of educational infrastructure; Elite migration; Social capital | Educational weaknesses and unemployment lead to elite exodus, but social capital creates opportunities for compensation. |
| Role of Media | Transparency and oversight; Awareness-raising | Media can strengthen urban governance through monitoring and cultural development. |

2. Geographical and Social Context of Khorramabad

Khorramabad is the capital of Lorestan Province, situated at the heart of the Zagros mountain range. Due to its valley topography and natural passageway between the central plateau and the Khuzestan plain, it assumes a strategic role within the nation's communication network (Khodaei & Teimouri, 2018).

This geographical positioning, on the one hand, facilitates connectivity to national thoroughfares such as the Tehran–Ahvaz axis, while, on the other, creates physical constraints arising from the city's longitudinal and mountainous configuration. The geographical location map (Figure 1) delineates Khorramabad's position along the nation's north–south corridor.

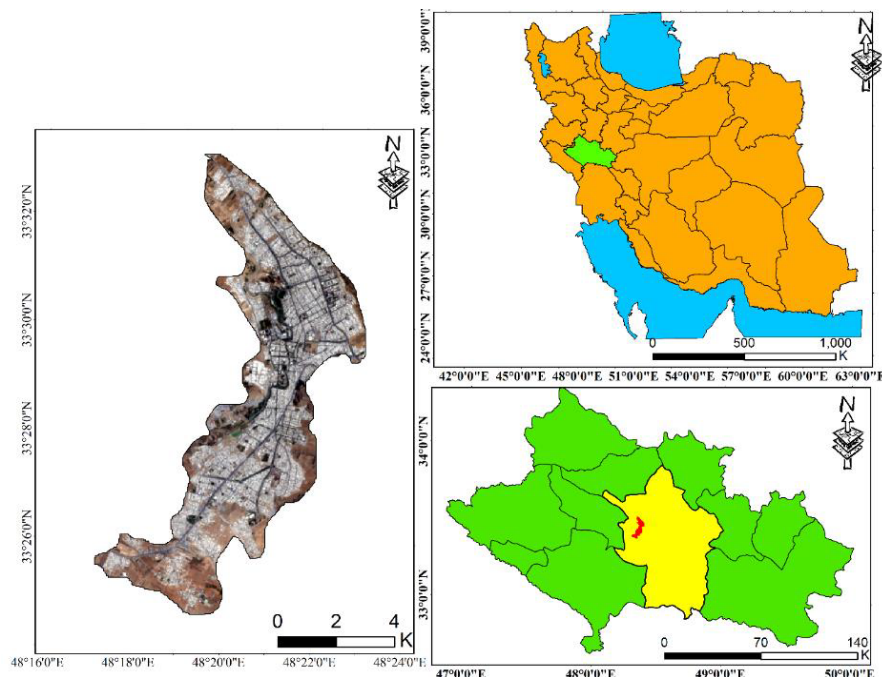


Figure 1. Study area – geographical location of Khorramabad

According to census data, Khorramabad has undergone substantial population growth over the past century. The city's population, which numbered fewer than 50,000 in the 1950s, reached approximately 414,000 by the 2025 estimate (Statistical Center of Iran, 2025). This upward trajectory intensified particularly following the land reforms of the 1960s and the developments resulting from the Iran-Iraq war (Yousefi

Mohammadi et al., 2016). The population change chart (Figure 2) illustrates these transformations and underscores the pivotal role of extensive rural-to-urban migrations in the city's accelerated expansion. Rapid population growth, juxtaposed with geographical limitations, has exerted additional pressure on urban infrastructure and services.

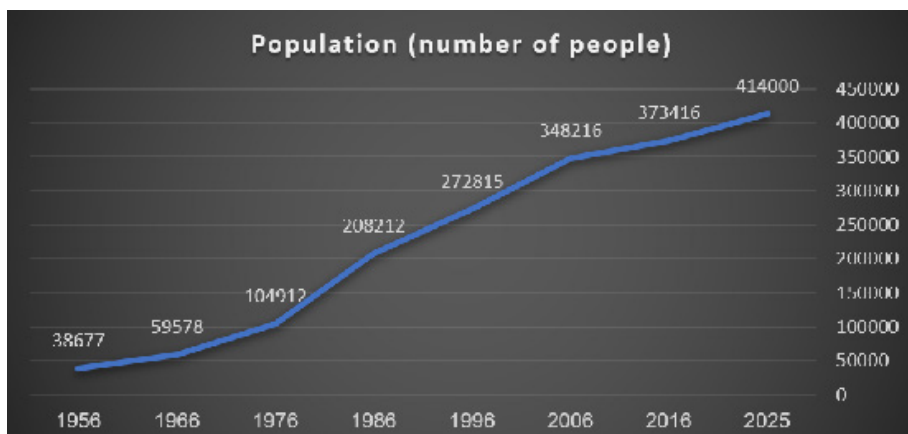


Figure 2. Historical trend of population changes in Khorramabad

From the vantage of spatial expansion, the city has encountered an unbalanced pattern over recent decades. The urban boundary development trend (Figure 3) reveals that Khorramabad has predominantly extended along the longitudinal valley axis, with peripheral settlements emerging in disregard of urban planning regulations. This configuration has not only

amplified traffic density but also posed challenges to land management and the delivery of public services (Eslami Nasab et al., 2018). Qualitative themes highlighted that the city's poor physical and infrastructural framework has exacerbated traffic congestion and unbalanced urban development.

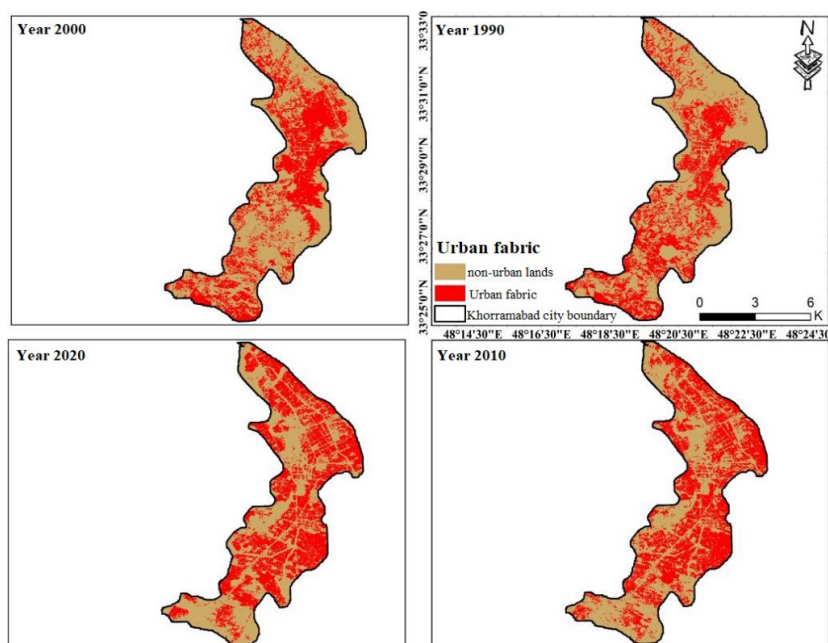


Figure 3. Spatial expansion trend of Khorramabad

The natural and physical attributes of Khorramabad constitute a confluence of capacities and constraints. With an average elevation of 1,148 meters above sea level, an approximate area of 6,233 square kilometers, and an annual precipitation average of 525.6 millimeters (Rahimiyekta et al., 2024), the city enjoys abundant water and climatic resources. The Khorram River and the surrounding pastures are the city's most important natural assets. Nonetheless, unsustainable exploitation and the absence of principled planning pose a grave threat to the sustainability of these resources.

From a social perspective, Khorramabad is a youthful city, with unemployment rates exceeding the national average (Statistical Center of Iran, 2025). Qualitative findings reveal that this condition has led to the intensified elite outmigration, expansion of informal settlements, and heightened spatial inequalities in access to educational and welfare services. Conversely, social capital rooted in ethno-religious identity and the proactive role of philanthropists in providing educational infrastructure have created opportunities to mitigate some of these disparities.

3. Historical Trajectory: Historical Analysis and Turning Points

Khorramabad, with a multi-millennial heritage, has always functioned beyond a local settlement. Its earliest civilizational signs trace back to the city of Khidalu, the political center of the Simashki dynasty during the Elamite era. The conquest of Khidalu by Ashurbanipal in 646 BCE initiated a series of politico-spatial changes in the region, underscoring that Khorramabad's strategic location has always been a locus of contention among regional powers. During the Sasanian period, under the decree of Shapur II, the city of Shapurkhast was built upon the ruins of Khidalu; however, its destruction in the early Islamic centuries shifted centrality to Falak-ol-Aflak Castle (Figure 4), which served as the principal axis of political power and the core of urban development. Khorramabad's designation as the capital of the Hasanuyid dynasty, the Hazarsapis, and the Atabegs of Little Lorestani further consolidated its regional stature, fortifying the nexus between ethno-religious identity and political authority (Jahani Chegeni & Tahersima, 2016).

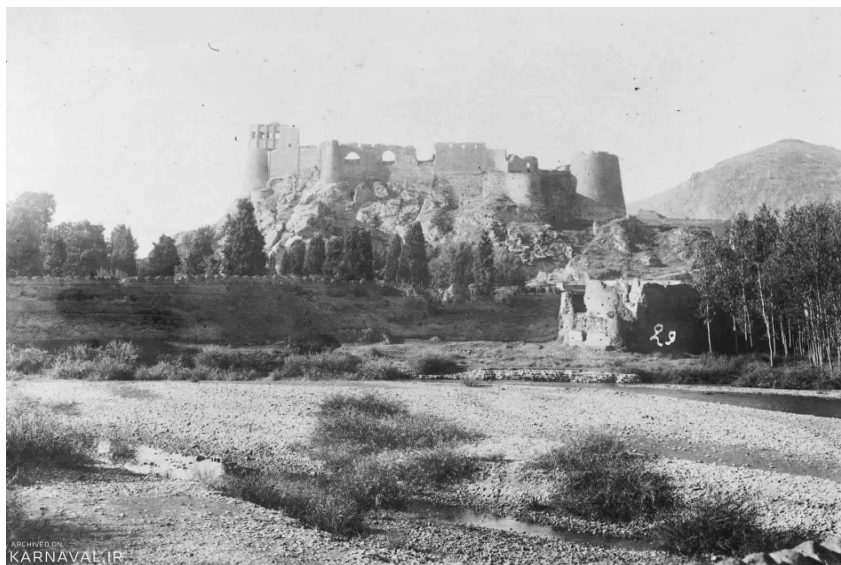


Figure 4. Falak-ol-aflak castle during the qajar dynasty era

In the Safavid era, the construction of infrastructure such as the Safavid Bridge and the Grand Mosque (970 Hijri/1562 CE) redefined Khorramabad's status, with these edifices enduring as historical icons of the city to the present day (Mahjour & Eslamiansab, 2014). Nevertheless, recurrent Ottoman invasions and attendant devastations exposed the fragility of the city's urban position. During the Qajar period, rural

migrations spurred the expansion of new neighborhoods and the formation of a more cohesive urban fabric (Mirderikvandi & Mahmoudi, 2016). Khorramabad's integration into the modern state apparatus commenced in the Pahlavi era, with the consolidation of Lorestan's political centrality in 1925 and the establishment of the municipality in 1926. The land reforms of the 1960s stimulated a new wave of

rural migration, accelerating the city's physical growth. This epoch was also an arena for political activism, as the Tudeh Party's activities in 1952–1953 bespoke the city's social capacity for political mobilization (Ghasemi, 1999).

The Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) inflicted one of the most severe historical blows upon the city; Khorramabad endured over 140 bombings, resulting in approximately 2,354 casualties (Ghasemi, 1999). This cataclysm not only ravaged the city's infrastructure but also subjected its managerial and institutional mechanisms to an unprecedented ordeal, revealing the imperative for reconstruction, reorganization, and the redefinition of urban policies. Comparison with

other Zagros cities indicates that the historical vulnerability of these locales stems concurrently from external pressures and institutional constraints. Kermanshah traversed a parallel path, whereas Hamadan was less vulnerable due to its institutional stability and geographical location (ISNA, 2025b; Hamedan Press, 2025).

In the 1990s and 2000s, initiatives for the restoration and national registration of historical monuments began, culminating recently in 2025 with the UNESCO World Heritage inscription of the prehistoric caves of Khorramabad Valley (Figure 5), which elevated the city's profile as a national and international cultural and tourism hub (UNESCO, 2025).



Figure 5. Ghamari cave, one of the six globally inscribed caves

Qualitative findings suggest that although these capacities hold potential as catalysts for sustainable development, deficiencies in the promotion, restoration, and maintenance of historical sites have impeded their full exploitation. In summary, Khorramabad's history mirrors a recurring cycle of intermittent flourishing and structural decline: its strategic position has repeatedly spurred urban vitality, yet external pressures (invasions, wars, governmental centralization) and institutional frailties have precluded the enduring consolidation of this eminence. This historical legacy continues to cast a shadow over the city's developmental challenges and identity-based opportunities.

4. Contemporary Trends: Challenges and Potentials

4.1. Challenges

1. Physical and Infrastructural: The longitudinal and valley-like position of Khorramabad has led to traffic concentration on main axes and limited the development of standard streets (Eslami Nasab et al., 2018). Some key urban development projects, including the Jahadgaran Coastal Street (Figure 6) and the eastern and western ring roads, have remained incomplete due to financial constraints and weak management (Fanni et al., 2020). According to interviewees, the municipality of Khorramabad's heavy reliance on unstable revenue sources, such as building permits, and the low rate of toll collection

have hindered the implementation of sustainable urban development plans. Furthermore, managerial instability and lack of expertise in decision-making

have contributed to inefficient urban policies and a continued cycle of partially completed projects.



Figure 6. Jahadgaran riverside boulevard

2. Environmental: The Khorram River (Figure 7), once the vital artery of the urban landscape, has devolved into a desiccated and polluted conduit laden with construction debris and refuse (Yousefzadeh et al., 2014). Additionally, the surrounding oak forests encounter annual degradation and wildfires, while insufficient per capita green space and surface water

management crises jeopardize the city's ecological sustainability (Siahmansour & Kamali, 2023). At the qualitative level, the Khorram River has emerged not merely as an environmental quandary but as a potent symbol of managerial failure and institutional incapacity in the perceptions of numerous participants.



Figure 7. Pollution and water scarcity in the khorram river

3. Economic: The pronounced dependence of the municipal budget on unstable sources, such as permit issuances and construction fines, has engendered financial volatility (Beyranvandzadeh et al., 2010). Only a fraction of renovation taxes is collected, and many industries lie dormant or semi-operational. Table 2 delineates the status of the city's principal

industries. Elevated unemployment rates and industrial stagnation have intensified human capital exodus and eroded the city's regional competitive positioning (Statistical Center of Iran, 2025). Interviews similarly underscored the dearth of financial transparency and the municipality's overreliance on short-term resources.

Table 2. Status of principal active industries in Khorramabad

| Industry/Industrial Unit | Current Status | Description |
|--|----------------|--|
| Khorramabad Petrochemical | Active | Largest existing industrial unit; provides direct and indirect employment |
| Sadre Foolad Company | Semi-active | The metal industry; plays a pivotal role in industrial employment |
| Fajr Safa Agro-Industry (Farmerz) | Active | Major unit in livestock, poultry, and agriculture; offers seasonal and permanent employment. |
| Boozhan Refrigerator Manufacturing Plant | Semi-active | Shut down post-revolution but reactivated with limited capacity since 2019 |

4. Institutional and Managerial: Managerial instability and frequent mayoral turnovers have precluded the implementation of long-term programs. The average tenure of Khorramabad's mayors is markedly shorter than that in Hamadan, contributing to diminished planning capacity (Yaftenev, 2025b; Hamedan Press, 2025). Kermanshah has encountered analogous conditions, whereas Hamadan, through relative stability, has sustained portions of its developmental policies (ISNA, 2025a, b). Moreover, the themes of institutional misalignment and weak management recurred frequently in the interviews.

5. Social: High population concentration in central schools, suboptimal educational quality, and elite outmigration exemplify spatial disparities in public services (Darabi, 2025). Pronounced unemployment and paucity of stable employment opportunities have precipitated widespread human capital depletion. The expansion of informal settlements and resultant social

fissures further imperil urban cohesion (Moftakhari et al., 2023). Qualitative themes further suggest that educational shortcomings and unemployment drive the exodus of elite and skilled labor.

4.2. Potentials

1. Tourism and Cultural Heritage: The presence of 505 nationally registered monuments and the UNESCO World Heritage inscription of the prehistoric caves in Khorramabad Valley (UNESCO, 2025) have elevated the city's national and international stature. Structures such as Falak-ol-Aflak Castle, the Broken (Shapuri) Bridge, and the Grand Mosque harbor the potential to position Khorramabad as a cultural tourism hub. Natural attractions, including Keeyow Lake (Figure 8), Shapuri Lake, and the Lorestan Rooftop, afford opportunities for the advancement of ecotourism and cultural tourism (Galehdar et al., 2025).



Figure 8. Keeyow lake and park adjacent to the Khorram river

2. Agriculture and Natural Resources: Annual production of millions of tons of agricultural and livestock products in Lorestan, partially attributed to Khorramabad (Shakarmi, 2023), coupled with expansive pastures and abundant runoff, facilitates the development of value-added industries and sustainable employment (Yaghoubi Farani & Godarzi, 2024).

3. Strategic Location: Khorramabad's location in the north-south corridor (Tehran-Ahvaz) is a critical advantage in linking the central plateau to the Khuzestan plain (Khodaei & Teimouri, 2018). This position enables the city's transformation into a transit node and investment hub in western Iran.

4. Social and Cultural Capital: Despite economic and institutional hurdles, remarkable social capacities persist. Philanthropic participation in school outfitting, local group activities in cultural and environmental domains, and the socio-religious capacities of students underscore a vital foundation for urban development. Local media, when equipped with reliable data, can catalyze networked governance and public advocacy (Masoudi et al., 2021). Qualitative analysis recurrently identified social capital and philanthropic participation as recurrent assets.

Challenges and potentials are presented in an analytical framework in Table 3.

Table 3. Analytical framework of khorramabad's contemporary challenges and potentials

| Domain | Challenge | Potential |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| Physical | Spatial constraints, incomplete projects, and informal settlements | Connectivity axes, urban regeneration opportunities |
| Environmental | Khorram River pollution, oak forest degradation, and green space deficits | Abundant water resources, expansive forests and pastures |
| Economic | Financial dependence on unsustainable revenues, industrial stagnation, and high unemployment | High-yield agriculture, value-added industries, and transit positioning |
| Institutional/Managerial | Managerial instability, transparency deficits, and institutional misalignment | Networked governance, and the capacity of local councils and media |
| Social | Elite outmigration, social fissures, and educational weaknesses | Socio-cultural capital, philanthropic engagement, and civil society capacities |
| Cultural/Historical | Tourism infrastructure shortages and promotional deficiencies | National and global monuments, Falak-ol-Aflak Castle, inscribed caves, and cultural events |

5. Policy Interventions and Strategies

The analysis of Khorramabad's status reveals that transcending the cycle of institutional instability and incomplete projects necessitates a suite of concurrent policies and strategies across economic, financial, physical, environmental, and institutional domains. The principal policy axes are delineated below.

1. Diversification of the Urban Economy: The municipality's heavy dependence on unsustainable sources, such as density sales and construction fines, challenges financial stability (Beyranvandzadeh et al., 2010). The proposed strategy is the development of small- and medium-sized enterprises in agricultural value-added industries and cultural-ecological tourism. Fostering industrial clusters and supporting local startups can mitigate unemployment rates and cultivate an environment conducive to private sector investment.

2. Reform of Urban Finance: Deficient collection of renovation taxes and overreliance on building permits have exacerbated budget deficits. Operational policies encompass:

- Designing an incentive-based discount system for compliant citizens;
- Integrating municipal databases with national financial systems to enhance transparency and public oversight;
- Advocating for legislative approval allocating a defined share of value-added tax revenues to intermediate cities, grounded in Article 48 of the Constitution, akin to successful precedents in select countries (Abidar et al., 2025).

3. Land and Housing Management: The proliferation of informal settlements and unbalanced urban expansion has yielded physical and social repercussions.

Key policies include:

- Implementing neighborhood revitalization programs in dilapidated areas, accompanied by public service provisioning;
- Providing affordable housing for low-income groups;
- Enforcing rigorous construction controls via location-based technologies (GIS).

4. Environmental Protection: The Khorram River and oak forests constitute the city's vital assets. Proposed policies comprise:

- Completing and expanding the urban wastewater treatment plant to rehabilitate the Khorram River;
- Executing preventive and protective programs to curtail oak forest wildfires;
- Augmenting per capita green space through urban green belts and the restoration of traditional orchards.

5. Strengthening Networked Governance: A primary deficiency in Khorramabad is the absence of institutional coordination and social participation. The proposed strategy involves:

- Establishing urban advisory councils incorporating academics, civil society actors, the private sector, and media representatives;
- Launching online transparency platforms for disseminating municipal financial and performance data;
- Bolstering linkages between local and national institutions to optimize resource utilization.

The aforementioned proposed strategies not only address extant challenges but also directly align with the research objectives (comprehensive appraisal of Khorramabad's status and delineation of pathways to sustainable development). In this manner, the policies forge a nexus between research findings and primary objectives, thereby consummating the analytical coherence of the study.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The primary objective of this research was to formulate an Urban Profile for Khorramabad and redefine its pathway to sustainable development through a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities confronting this intermediate city in the Zagros region. The findings demonstrate that Khorramabad possesses the potential to emerge as a regional development hub, leveraging strategic geographical advantages (locating in the north-south

corridor), abundant natural resources (copious runoff and agricultural capacities), and a unique cultural heritage (UNESCO World Heritage inscription of the prehistoric caves). However, institutional barriers (misalignments and managerial instability), financial constraints (reliance on unsustainable revenues), and physical impediments (unbalanced expansion and infrastructural shortages) have marginalized these capacities. The study posits that sustainable development in Khorramabad can only be realized through a transition from fragmented projects to an integrated framework predicated on local governance reforms, enhanced transparency and accountability, targeted mobilization of social capital, and fortified regional linkages. This paradigm not only ruptures the historical cycle of developmental failures but also repositions Khorramabad as a "strategic intermediate city" within Iran's urban network.

This study, by proffering a comprehensive and interdisciplinary analysis of Khorramabad's status, furnishes an integrated framework for examining Iran's intermediate cities. Unlike prior investigations that focused mainly on disparate aspects, such as urban poverty or informal settlements, this research analyzed physical, environmental, economic, institutional, and social dimensions simultaneously using an urban profile approach. This methodology introduced Khorramabad as an exemplar of Zagros intermediate cities whose challenges epitomize the general pattern of developmental fragility in the region. Such a framework may underpin comparative studies with analogous cities such as Hamadan, Kermanshah, and Sanandaj, thereby augmenting comprehension of the role of intermediate cities in national spatial equilibrium.

6.1. Policy Implications

To actualize sustainable development in Khorramabad and redefine its role as a strategic intermediate city, the following policies are imperative:

- Establishing Enduring Financial Stability: Transitioning from dependence on unsustainable sources toward financial models anchored in private sector participation and national taxation to ensure the continuity of developmental projects.
- Elevating Environmental Sustainability: Safeguarding natural ecosystems and water resources to avert long-term crises and bolster tourism appeal.
- Mitigating Spatial-Social Inequalities: Revitalizing underprivileged neighborhoods and enhancing

equitable access to public services to fortify social cohesion.

- Bolstering Responsive Governance: Instituting participatory mechanisms involving local institutions, universities, and civil society to amplify public trust and institutional efficacy.
- Enhancing Regional Positioning: Fostering synergies with the country's western corridor and peer cities to transform Khorramabad into a regional investment and transit hub.

6.2. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study encountered several limitations:

- Scarcity of Up-to-Date and Coherent Data: Lack of precise statistics in financial and environmental domains limited the accuracy of comparative analyses.
- Reliance on Qualitative Data: Although interviews were strengthened through triangulation, perceptual bias remained a potential concern.
- Absence of Urban Monitoring Systems: Lack of routine urban policy evaluations rendered the assessment of intervention efficacy challenging.
- Constrained Generalizability: The context-specific nature of the study limited the generalizability of findings to other cities.

For future investigations, the following are recommended:

- Conducting comparative studies among Iran's intermediate cities to discern common and distinctive developmental patterns.
- Designing scenario-based models for Khorramabad's future, emphasizing environmental and institutional sustainability.
- Integrating quantitative methods, such as spatial analysis and big data, alongside qualitative data to increase the validity of findings.
- Developing urban monitoring frameworks for the continuous evaluation of policies and developmental interventions.

The research revealed that Khorramabad's future resides not in fragmented projects but in redefining its role as a "strategic intermediate city" in western Iran, a role attainable solely through managerial stability, social trust, and integrated policymaking.

Author Contributions

AliAsghar Abdeshahi (100%): Conceptualization, methodology, data collection and analysis, investigation, writing original draft, review, and editing.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no financial, commercial, or other conflicts of interest related to this research. This study received no external funding and has not been previously published in any journal, nor is it currently under consideration by another publication outlet.

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