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### Original Research Article

## Representation of Reza Shah's Authority in the Memorial Landscape of Pahlavi-era Cities: A Case Study of Reza Shah Square in Dezful

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### Abstract

**Problem statement:** Reza Shah Square and its equestrian statue in Dezful were among the numerous commemorative spaces constructed during the Second Pahlavi era in urban centers across Iran. This study posits a central research question: Can these squares be interpreted as deliberate assertions of the Pahlavi monarchy's presence, authority, and legitimization within the contemporary urban fabric? If so, through what mechanisms was this achieved?

**Research objective:** This study critically examines the role and significance of Reza Shah Square in Dezful, analyzing its function as a monument of legitimization and an instrument for the consolidation of political power.

**Research method:** Employing a textual analytical approach, the study examined Reza Shah Square with particular attention to its intertextual relationships with the surrounding urban context. This memorial landscape was further analyzed through the methodological lens of iconography to decode its symbolic content.

**Conclusion:** Through comparative analysis, this study identifies a potent correlation between the qualities ascribed to Reza Shah by his son, Mohammad Reza Shah, and the semiotic features embedded within Reza Shah Square. It argues that the production of an authoritative image of Reza Shah during the latter's reign constituted a strategic response to the young Shah's imperative to establish his own authority and public acceptance. This was accomplished by leveraging the public memory and symbolic capital of his father. This process is conceptualized as "borrowing authority," whereby, in the early decades of his rule, the Second Pahlavi Shah repurposed Reza Shah squares into central loci for his own legitimization, crafting a narrative that aligned with the immediate political exigencies of the time.

**Keywords:** *Reza Shah's statue, Representation, Political authority, Memorial landscape, Legitimization, Pahlavi era, Urban space.*

### Introduction and Problem Statement

As the first and most important square of Dezful, Reza Shah Square was part of a broader family of "Reza Shah squares" that, during the Pahlavi era

(specifically the second Pahlavi period), acquired a distinctive urban form across cities nationwide. Their defining features consisted of a central plaza, a royal commemorative name, a monumental statue at the center, and two radial boulevards. Despite the

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evident significance of these squares, few studies have examined their role in consolidating the legitimacy of the Pahlavi monarchy.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to reconstruct the representation of Reza Shah's authority within the commemorative urban landscape of Pahlavi-era cities, specifically through the case of Dezful's Reza Shah Square. To this end, an iconographic approach is employed to analyze the square during the first half of Mohammad-Reza Shah's rule, with a focus on his specific views and attitudes toward his father's political legacy.

This research addresses the following questions: What symbolic functions did the Reza Shah squares perform at various iconographic levels during the first half of Mohammad-Reza Shah's reign? How did these symbolic functions relate to the historical context and Mohammad-Reza Shah's need for instruments to consolidate monarchical legitimacy and authority?

## Literature Review

Existing domestic scholarship on urban squares has largely confined its focus to superficial semantic dimensions, neglecting more critical analytical frameworks such as the political economy of space, the role of governance structures, and underlying ideological agendas. Only a limited number of studies have engaged with these deeper, more consequential layers of urban analysis. Notably, Mirmozaffari Rudsari & Abdollahzade Taraf (2018) examined the interplay between the organizing principles of urban squares and the socio-political transformations of the early Pahlavi era. Khanmohammadi & Mirzaei (2022) investigated the manifestations of power within urban memory across both the Qajar and Pahlavi periods. More recently, Abedini (2024) analyzed Baharestan Square as a locus of symbolic resistance.

In contrast, English-language literature in this domain has predominantly centered on Tehran and its monumental structures, particularly Shahyad Square (now Azadi Square) and the Shahrestan complex. Within this corpus, Grigor (2003) interrogates the shifting significances of Shahyad/Azadi Square in

relation to the political transition from the Pahlavi monarchy to the Islamic Republic. Emami (2014) addresses the antagonistic cultural policies embodied in the Queen's Circle (Meydan-e Maleke) versus the technocratic modernism promoted by the Shah and his administration within the "Pahlavi Shahrestan" project. Hemmati (2015) argues that Shahyad Square served as a critical apparatus for both the Pahlavi and post-revolutionary governments in constructing narratives of the nation's past, present, and future. Mohajeri (2016) explores the role of competing factions in shaping the development of the Shahrestan complex. Finally, Mozaffari & Westbrook (2020) analyze Shahyad Square as a product of developmentalist and cultural discourses, emphasizing the fluidity and multiplicity of its meanings over time.

## Theoretical Foundations

### • Iconography

The iconographic method, principally developed by Erwin Panofsky (1995/2016), was initially applied in the study of medieval Gothic architecture and Renaissance painting (Cosgrove & Jackson, 1987, 97). Panofsky (1995/2016, 42) conceptualizes iconography as a branch of art history concerned with the thematic content and meaning of works of art, in contrast to the analysis of their formal attributes. His methodological framework proposes a tripartite stratification of meaning inherent in artistic works:

1. Pre-iconographical Level (Primary or Natural Subject Matter): This foundational level pertains to the apprehension of pure forms, constituting the world of artistic motifs. These forms operate as carriers of primary or natural meaning, which is understood through the simple identification of depicted objects and narratives (*ibid.*, 44).
2. Iconographical Level (Secondary or Conventional Subject Matter): This secondary stratum involves connecting artistic motifs and their combinations to specific themes or concepts, commonly denoted as stories and allegories. The correct interpretation at this level necessitates knowledge of literary sources

and cultural conventions. The identification of these conventional meanings, embedded in images, stories, and allegories, constitutes the core domain of iconographical analysis (*ibid.*, 45). For instance, a comprehensive understanding of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* requires familiarity with the narratives of Christian history and its established iconographic traditions.

3. **Iconological Level (Intrinsic Meaning or Content):** The deepest stratum of interpretation, iconology, is apprehended by deciphering the underlying principles that reveal the essential tendencies of the human mind, manifesting the worldview of a nation, a historical period, a social class, or a religious and philosophical persuasion. These principles are unconsciously synthesized and articulated by an individual creator within the work of art (*ibid.*, 46 & 47). For example, an iconological investigation of *The Last Supper* can be interpreted in various ways - as a testament to Leonardo da Vinci's exceptional talent, a representation of the flourishing Italian High Renaissance, or a reflection of a particular religious perspective.

#### • **Landscape iconography and ideology**

Within the field of human geography, the application of Panofsky's method of iconography to the study of cultural landscapes was pioneered by Daniels & Cosgrove (1988). Their work sought to decode the social and power relations embedded within various forms of landscape imagery (Gilbert, 2008, 102). In their seminal introduction, Daniels & Cosgrove (1988, 1) posit that "a landscape is a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring, or symbolizing surroundings". They contend that by treating landscape as a text and subjecting it to iconological interpretation, previously obscured layers of meaning can be revealed. This methodological approach places a painting within a specific historical context, such as the Renaissance era or the 19th century, to examine the ideologies and worldviews depicted in its images (Hoelscher, 2019, 113).

#### • **Landscape as an ideologically mediated representation**

Conceived as a represented ideology, landscape functions as a mediating representation that both

encodes and conceals the power relations of the society from which it emanates (Oakes & Price, 2008, 165). Consequently, landscape operates as a medium in the fullest sense of the term (Mitchell, 2008, 169). It is for this reason that national elites across various societies have strategically erected statues, monuments, grand squares, and ornate buildings. These constructed environments act as "theaters of memory," providing a stage upon which selective narratives of sovereignty and national identity can be ritually performed and reinforced (Till, 2003, 289 & 290). Geographers conceptualize these public symbols as constituent elements of larger cultural landscapes. Such landscapes do not merely reflect particular historical viewpoints; they actively work to legitimize those viewpoints and integrate them into a social normative order (Alderman et al., 2020, 39 & 40). Thus, they serve as crucial symbolic conduits, employed not only to articulate a specific version of history but also to endow it with legitimacy and authority (Dwyer & Alderman, 2008, 167).

#### **Research Methodology**

The theoretical and analytical foundation of this research is anchored in textual and iconographic approaches. This methodological framework treats representations as social constructs, situating them within their specific cultural, historical, and political milieus to decode their symbolic and latent meanings (Holscher, 2020, 113). Accordingly, this study employs a critical reading of Reza Shah Square in Dezfoul to examine how it was utilized as a monument for legitimizing and consolidating power during the second Pahlavi era.

The paper is structured as follows: The first section addresses the legitimacy crisis within the Pahlavi monarchy. The second section conducts a comparative analysis, juxtaposing the semiotic characteristics of the square with Mohammad Reza Shah's conception of his father, Reza Shah. For this purpose, primary reference is made to the book "Mission for My Country" (Pahlavi, 1961), the text in which Mohammad Reza Shah most extensively

elaborates on his personal relationship with his father (Milani, 2015, 13).

Subsequently, the square is analyzed through its intertextual relations with the surrounding urban fabric. This intertextual examination aims to construct a situated understanding of the square's role and significance within the city's spatial narrative. Finally, this situated image of Reza Shah Square is positioned within the specific socio-political context of the research, namely the first half of the second Pahlavi reign. At this final stage, employing an iconographic approach, the study interprets Reza Shah Square as a spatial embodiment of the second Pahlavi Shah's personal and political exigencies.

## Discussion

### • The crisis of legitimacy and succession in the Pahlavi Monarchy

In February 1921, Reza Khan entered Tehran through a military coup at the age of 43. His life up to that point may be succinctly described as one shaped predominantly within the context of the Cossack Brigade. Indeed, absent the Cossack Division from his biography, little of substantive historical significance remains (Zibakalam, 2019, 61). Reza Khan was, in essence, a self-made man of non-aristocratic and modest origins (Matin, 2012/2021, 406). By examining the doctrine of the 'Divine Farr' (Farr-e Īzādī), this section argues that such origins were fundamentally incompatible with the traditional framework of legitimizing the Iranian Shah.

In ancient Iran, kingship was conceived as a divine endowment, bestowed upon the ruler by Ahura Mazda (Hinnells, 1975/2022, 155). According to Ferdowsi's (2008, Vol. 5, 406 & 407) Šāhnāmeḥ (The Book of Kings), the Divine Farr epitomizes the qualities of an ideal sovereign; however, its attainment was contingent upon two principal prerequisites, without which no ruler could claim legitimacy: being Iranian (Irāni Farr) and belonging to the royal lineage (Farr-e Kayāni or Šāhanšāhi). Thus, within Iran's historical and ideological traditions, genealogical descent from prior kings

constituted an essential precondition for legitimate rule.

The narrative of Lohrāsp's ascension to the throne offers a pertinent illustration of the critical importance ascribed to royal ancestry. When Kay Khosrow introduces Lohrāsp as his successor, the Iranian heroes object strenuously, citing his apparent lack of connection to the royal house. It is only upon revelation that Lohrāsp's lineage does, in fact, trace back to the royal family that their opposition is withdrawn. Consequently, within the Šāhnāmeḥ, one not descended from the royal family could under no circumstances legitimately become Shah (Nöldeke, 1896/2021, 140). Possession of the Farr remained unattainable for those not of the seed of Iranian kings (Shahbazi, 2012, 61).

Given these two prerequisites, the systematic fabrication of genealogies by emerging sovereigns, connecting their lineage to ancient Iranian monarchic traditions, became a conventional practice. For instance, following the Achaemenid era, accession to the throne was contingent upon asserting a genealogical connection to the preceding dynasty (Wiesehöfer, 1996/2004, 207). Within this framework, the introductory section of the ancient manuscript "Kārnāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān" (The Book of the Deeds of Ardashir, Son of Papak) (Mashkur, 1950, 1 & 2) explicitly associates Sasan, the father of Ardashir, with the last Achaemenid ruler. Following the advent of Islam, a majority of both Iranian and non-Iranian dynasties similarly ascribed their origins to the ancient kings of Iran (Azimi, 2020, 72).

Reza Shah stands as one of the few monarchs in Iranian history who not only lacked an aristocratic lineage but also made no attempt to fabricate one. This period coincided with the emergence of scientific historiography, which increasingly undermined the legitimacy of invented genealogical traditions. Consequently, the non-aristocratic origins of Reza Shah's family were deliberately obscured rather than falsified. Official Pahlavi historiography provided minimal documentation concerning his familial

background; for instance, Sa' id Nafisi (1965, 8), as the state-appointed biographer, dedicates merely two lines to the subject. Similarly, Mohammad Reza Shah, in his biographical account of his father, addresses the matter only briefly (Pahlavi, 1961, 41). Thus, the Pahlavi monarchy lacked the foundational prerequisite for traditional legitimacy. In response, Reza Shah relied heavily on authority and domination to consolidate his rule. His non-aristocratic origins and failure to conform to the conventional prerequisites of Persian kingship compelled him to employ coercive power structures to manufacture legitimacy and public acquiescence. Consequently, he cultivated an image of an authoritarian and domineering ruler, leveraging state power to compensate for his lack of historical and genealogical capital.

Of course, the ascension of his son, Mohammad Reza Shah, to the throne was likewise circumscribed by this inherent limitation. However, in contrast to his father, he neither possessed Reza Shah's formidable personal attributes nor did he inherit a favorable historical juncture. The Allied occupation of Iran in September 1941 and the subsequent exile of Reza Shah precipitated Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's sudden inheritance of a throne subjugated by foreign powers. From the outset, his sovereignty was critically undermined by four principal factors.

First, the crisis of national occupation during World War II placed the young monarch in an acutely vulnerable position from the beginning of his reign. Second, unlike Reza Shah, who had ascended to power through a deliberate and forceful consolidation of authority, Mohammad Reza Shah was installed primarily by the will of external powers. Consequently, the circumstances of his accession and the overt role of foreign influence therein remained a persistent source of political vulnerability throughout his rule. Furthermore, during these formative years, the Shah was situated among a cadre of seasoned and assertive politicians who often held him in low esteem. Among the most formidable of these figures was Ahmad Qavam, whose political maneuvering posed significant

challenges to the palace (Katouzian, 2009/2021, 253). Mohammad Mosaddegh emerged as another potent premier, whose tenure fundamentally recalibrated the traditional power dynamic between the monarchy and the executive branch, effectively inverting their respective authorities compared to previous eras (Laing, 1977/1992, 170-172). The Shah would later reflect with palpable bitterness on Mosaddegh's perceived insolence, even towards the memory of his father (Pahlavi, 1980/1993, 123).

Finally, a fundamental problem resided in the Shah's own personal disposition and behavioral tendencies. He was, by nature, markedly timid, a trait that, by numerous accounts, persisted even at the zenith of his power and until the end of his life (Nahavandi & Bomati, 2013, 83). This statement is supported by international statesmen who had close interactions with him. Henry Kissinger (1979/1980, 1479) noted in his memoirs: "As I got to know the Shah better over time, I realized that he was not inherently a domineering personality. In fact, he was rather shy and withdrawn. He was a gentle and even sentimental man [...] His majestic aspect was more a result of practicing to play this role". Anthony Parsons (1984/1985, 208), the British ambassador to Iran during the final years of Pahlavi rule, similarly documented congruent impressions of the Shah's character in his own accounts.

#### • The formation and development process of Reza Shah Square in Dezful

With the ratification of the Municipality Law in 1930 (1309 SH), the implementation of European-inspired street layouts was initiated nationwide (Habibi, 2021, 162). Consequently, the first major physical intervention in Dezful was undertaken in 1932 (1311 SH), involving the construction of three new thoroughfares designated simply as Streets 1, 2, and 3, which were carved through the city's historical urban fabric (Fig. 1). These streets were subsequently renamed: Street 1 became Shahpour, Street 2 was designated as Pahlavi, and Street 3 was named Cyrus.

A significant urban transformation during this period was the establishment of the first modern square at the intersection of Cyrus and Pahlavi streets. Initially referred to as “Meydan-e Felke” (The Roundabout), this space primarily served traffic circulation and economic functions. However, the most pivotal change occurred in 1964 (1343 SH) with the installation of a statue of Reza Shah at the site. Following the erection of the statue, the square was officially renamed Reza Shah Square. Thereby, it was transformed into a symbolic conduit for representing the authority and enduring presence of the Pahlavi monarchy.

This transformation was achieved through a process termed “symbolic accumulation” by Dwyer (2004). Consequently, a square that previously held limited representative or political significance acquired new symbolic meanings and functions through the accumulation of additional layers of signification. At a primary level, this was realized by coupling a commemorative nomenclature with an associated statuary. Reza Shah Square and its accrued strata of meaning thus constituted a semiotic system. At a secondary level, this system entered into a dialogue through intertextual relations with its surrounding context. This dialogic characteristic enabled the entire square to be mobilized in the service of the governing power’s intended messages.

On one hand, this dialogue stood in contrast to, and sought to negate, the traditional urban fabric. Conversely, it aligned with features of the nascent urban landscape, thereby reinforcing a deliberately constructed historical narrative intended to cement the cultural hegemony of the Pahlavi monarchy<sup>1</sup>.

#### • A comparative analysis of the Pahlavi II era’s mental image of its predecessor and the characteristics of Reza Shah Square

Among the inaugural statuary commissions of the Pahlavi dynasty were three effigies of Reza Shah, commissioned from the French sculptor Auguste Mailland in 1935 by the municipality of Tehran. These sculptures were intended for installation in three pivotal urban spaces: Rahahan (Railway) Square, Sepah Square, and the square located on the Karaj

road (حمل و انتقال مجسمه...، 1938). In the ensuing decades, these initial monuments established a primary archetype for subsequent royal statuary (Fig. 2). Indeed, during the nascent years of Mohammad Reza Shah’s reign, the figure of Reza Shah persisted as the dominant subject within the nation’s commemorative urban squares. An analysis of data on 24 such statues of Reza Shah, erected during the second Pahlavi era, reveals a distinct chronological pattern: five were installed in the 1940s, twelve in the 1950s, four in the 1960s, and three in the 1970s.

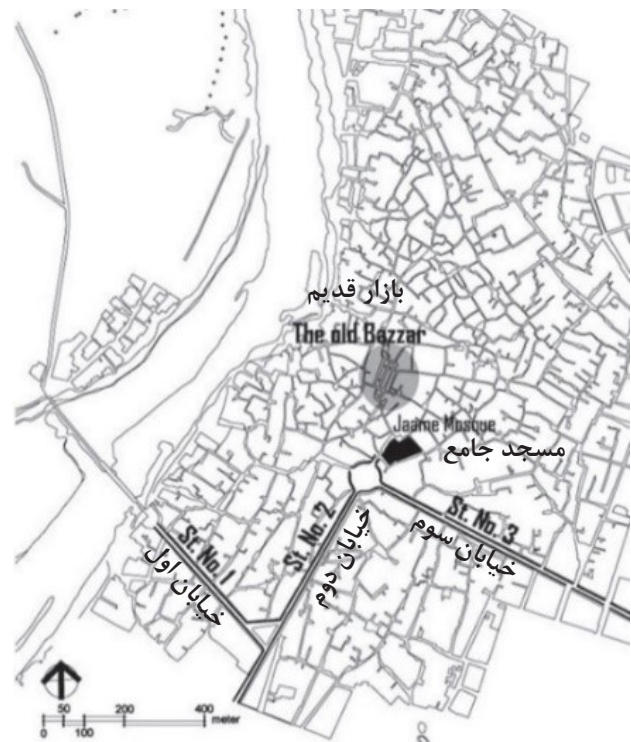


Fig. 1. The first modern streets and squares, and the location of the Jameh Mosque and the old bazaar of Dezful. Source: Masoudi Nejad, 2013, 147.

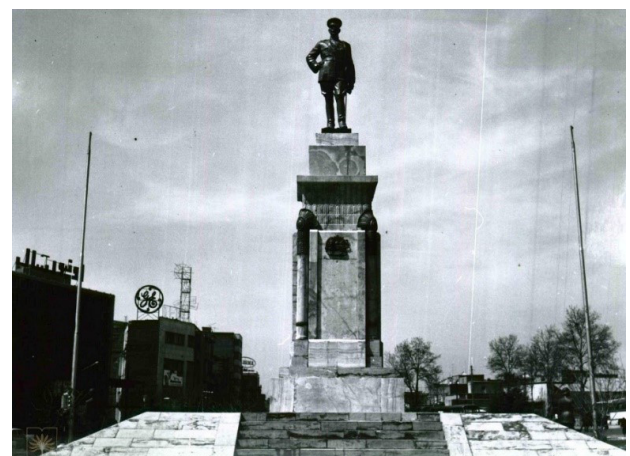


Fig. 2. 24 Esfand Square, Tehran. Source: National Library and Archives Organization of Iran, Document number: 1289/25/998.

This distribution indicates that the majority of these commemorative squares were constructed during the first half of Mohammad Reza Shah's monarchy, with their frequency declining markedly over time as the second Pahlavi's political power became increasingly consolidated.

Within this context, and after years of persistent pursuit, the mayor of Dezful in 1964 officially notified the City Council that the Municipality of Tehran had approved the installation of a statue of Reza Shah in Falakeh Square, announcing:

"I have joyous news for the gentlemen; this news fulfills one of the expectations of both the council members and the Shah-loving people of Dezful. Indeed, this news is the very reason for convening this extraordinary session: authorization has been granted for the installation of the statue of Reza Shah in Falakeh Square of Dezful... and no further impediments remain to its installation" ([Anjoman-e Shahrestan-e Dezful, 1964](#)).

The erection of these statues, particularly within that specific historical and political context, was motivated by more than just a desire to commemorate Reza Shah himself. To critically analyze the underlying rationale, it is first necessary to examine the symbolic status of Reza Shah during the Second Pahlavi era. Arguably, no concept better embodies the meaning of "Reza Shah" within the context of Iranian modern history and collective memory than that of "authority." This study subsequently demonstrates how Mohammad Reza Shah's perception of his father can be categorized into three distinct attribute groups, based on a thorough analysis of memoirs from the Second Pahlavi era:

- Authoritarian Modernity
- Domineering Nature
- Military Order and Hierarchy

These three defined concepts serve as an analytical framework for a comparative study of Mohammad Reza Shah's personal view of his father and its spatial representation in Reza Shah Square.

#### • Reza Shah as the symbol of authoritarian Modernity

Mohammad Reza Shah ([Pahlavi, 1961, 54](#)).

consistently depicted his father as the nation's savior from backwardness, who "directed [the country's attention] toward the Western world and its civilization". He ([ibid., 240](#)) credited Reza Shah with major accomplishments such as the formal separation of state and religion, the revocation of the clergy's judicial authority, the elimination of religious interference in public education, and the advancement of women's emancipation. Furthermore, he ([ibid., 240](#)) asserted that Reza Shah "believed that our country must traverse the stages of progress and development that the Western world had passed through as rapidly as possible". In alignment with this perception, Reza Shah Square in Dezful serves as a vivid spatial manifestation of authoritarian modernity. This signification is articulated through two opposing codes:

**The Traditional-Modern Dichotomy:** The most profound expression of authoritarian modernity's imposition onto the urban landscape of Dezful was realized through the construction of Reza Shah Square and its radiating street network. The incision of these radial avenues into the historical urban fabric resulted in the fragmentation of numerous traditional structures, including the ancient bazaar, thereby imposing a new spatial order. This reconfigured urban form stood in direct opposition to the organic, traditional organization of the city, ultimately transforming Dezful within an irreconcilable framework of modern versus traditional antagonism.

**Center-Periphery Orientation:** Mirroring the centralized power structure of the Pahlavi regime, which was dictated from the core to the margins, symbolic power within Reza Shah Square was projected from the central point, marked by the statue of Reza Shah, through radial streets outward across the urban territory. Just as Reza Shah himself embodied the apex of authoritarian modernity, the square and its monument functioned as its spatial manifestation, becoming the primary symbol of centralized, authoritarian planning ([Fig. 3](#)).

#### • Reza Shah as an embodiment of hegemonic dominance

Descriptions of his father by Mohammad Reza Shah

predominantly emphasized Reza Shah's physicality. The Shah consistently portrayed his father's formidable physique and demeanor using a specific lexicon: "a tall man," possessing an "elongated and lofty stature," "broad shoulders," "firmness," an "awe-inspiring presence," a "majestic demeanor," a "masculine face," and, perhaps most symbolically potent, a stature compared to the Alborz Mountains (ibid., 63 & 64). Another frequently cited attribute, as recounted by Mohammad Reza Shah, was Reza Shah's penetrating gaze: "which penetrated the very essence of those who faced him" (ibid., 42). This is further dramatized elsewhere with the assertion: "There were many strong-willed and powerful men who would tremble at a single glance from him... As if a mysterious ray from his eyes penetrated deep into the hearts of others" (ibid., 55). This ethos of dominance was materially articulated within the spatial configuration of Reza Shah Square through the deployment of two opposed architectural codes:

**The Dichotomy of Fragility and Solidity:** A fundamental characteristic of Pahlavi-era public squares was their perceived permanence and solidity, achieved through the extensive use of stone, metal, and reinforced concrete. This material palette was strategically employed to immortalize the firmness and authority of Reza Shah, an expression of state power that was systematically replicated in urban centers across the nation. Furthermore, the square's construction within a traditional urban fabric composed primarily of clay and mud-brick established a powerful visual and symbolic dichotomy. The stark contrast between the solidity of the new square (representing the modernizing state) and the perceived fragility of its traditional context served to vividly materialize the Shah's narrative of his father, embodying firmness and awe. Consequently, the square was not merely inserted into the urban landscape but was engineered to establish a position of symbolic and hegemonic dominance over the adjacent organic fabric.

**Bottom-Up Perspective:** From Chandler's (2007/2008, 139) standpoint, spatial contiguity entails a range of semantic connotations. In a similar

vein, Lakoff and Johnson contend that compositions along the vertical axis carry distinct implicit meanings. They assert that "up" is conventionally associated with positive qualities such as goodness, virtue, health, life, futurity, superiority, power, and rationality, whereas "down" is tied to negative notions including badness, depravity, sickness, death, subordination, and subjugation. Furthermore, Boudon (1986, 110) characterizes vertical structures as sacred and horizontal ones as profane.

In this context, the bottom-up perspective of this square can be interpreted as a significant semiotic vehicle aligned with the expression of dominance. The placement of the statue atop a 12-meter-high pedestal column (Fig. 4) facilitates a top-down gaze, thereby imparting a sense of superiority and reinforcing the dominant persona of Reza Shah to the viewer. As Mitchell (2000, 116) aptly notes, "the way of seeing a



Fig. 3. Center-Periphery Orientation in Reza Shah Square. Source: Cultural Institute of Dezfulology.



Fig. 4. Low-Angle Perspective of the Square and the Statue of Reza Shah. Source: Personal archive of Ahmad Noghrechi.

landscape is a technique for presenting ideological and material control as part of the inevitable order of things”.

#### • **Reza Shah as an embodiment of military order and hierarchy**

Reza Shah sustained a profound dedication to military discipline throughout his lifetime. As recounted by Freydoun Jam, who accompanied him during his exile on Mauritius, the Shah expressed profound consternation when compelled to wear civilian attire at a reception hosted by the island’s governor, declaring, “May God strike me dead that I am forced to wear these clothes” (Al-Mouti, 1994, 3). This anecdote underscores his deep identification with his military persona. His son, Mohammad Reza Shah (Pahlavi, 1961), further codifies this image, describing his father as: “A self-made military man, pragmatic, possessing exceptional command and leadership intelligence, embodying military conduct, with a long-standing military background, an experienced combatant, a self-sacrificing soldier, disciplined and vigilant, with simple tastes and personal demeanor, and a man of great endurance”. Consequently, Reza Shah’s military uniform and bearing, accentuated by his tall and broad-shouldered physique, were meticulously cultivated into a potent political symbol. The urban form of Reza Shah Square itself manifested this military discipline through the articulation of two contrasting codes, as follows:

**The Dichotomy of Order and Disorder:** An analysis of aerial imagery of Reza Shah Square and its radial streets reveals a stark juxtaposition between the imposed geometric order of the square and the traditional, organic urban fabric that surrounds it. Comprehensive axial symmetries were instrumental in conveying a sense of rigid geometric order, thereby evoking an association with political and military discipline. This symmetry was meticulously maintained, extending from the central point of the square, often occupied by his statue, outward along its radiating arterial streets. Such geometric precision and an overt obsession with symmetry epitomized the Pahlavi dynasty’s ideological inclination towards military hierarchy and order, representing a clear

architectural opposition to the perceived disorder of the indigenous urban morphology.

**The Dichotomy of Realism and Abstraction:** A defining characteristic of royal statuary during the Pahlavi era was its commitment to figurative realism. This marked a significant departure from preceding periods, wherein the creation of anthropomorphic sculpture was largely proscribed under prevailing interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence. A notable example of this tension occurred when Naser al-Din Shah Qajar commissioned a statue of himself for public display in Tehran, only to abandon the project due to fears of clerical and public backlash (E’temad os-Saltaneh, 2011, 597). This inhibitory mindset persisted well into the mid-Pahlavi era, including throughout Mohammad Mosaddegh’s premiership (Milani, 2015, 227). The Pahlavi dynasty, however, decisively breached this tradition, with its monarchs becoming frequent subjects of public statuary. This employed realism was not merely an aesthetic choice but was intrinsically aligned with the authoritarian and militaristic discourse the regime sought to project. The sculptural representations meticulously depicted Reza Shah as a formidable and potent leader, embodying a resolute will and an immutable grandeur, perpetually poised to confront disorder and instil stability.

Ultimately, a comparative analysis of the depiction of the first Pahlavi monarch, as presented in the memoirs of his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, alongside a semiotic examination of the urban form of Reza Shah Square and his equestrian statue in Dezful, reveals a profound congruence. This analysis posits a significant correspondence between the semiotic features encoded within the square and its statuary and the mental image meticulously constructed within the Shah’s memoirs (Table 1).

Employing Panofsky’s three-tiered methodological framework, the subsequent analysis examines the thematic constructs under discussion.

**Pre-iconographic Level:** At this primary level of analysis, a series of latent semiotic codes embedded within Reza Shah Square, such as high versus low,

fragility versus solidity, are extracted to delineate the square’s design language. It is established that, through the deployment of an authoritarian and confrontational architectural idiom, the square asserts its narrative from a position of superiority.

Iconographic Level: At this secondary tier, a correspondence is identified between the linguistic features -that is, the pre-iconographic attributes- of Reza Shah Square and the tenets of authoritarian modernity, as well as the personal characteristics of Reza Shah himself. To elucidate this relationship, the square is not treated as an isolated entity; rather, it is analyzed in conjunction with its radial streets as the most salient manifestations of urban modernization. This analysis is situated within an intertextual relationship with the surrounding context, namely, the pre-existing urban fabric. As illustrated in Table 2, Reza Shah Square employs a series of antagonistic urban codes. Framed by the dominant iconography of Reza Shah himself, the square establishes itself in direct opposition to the old urban fabric, ultimately achieving spatial dominance over it.

The resultant outcome is the production and communication of a spatially embedded message to its audience: the representation of Reza Shah’s authority within the urban landscape.

The Iconographic Level: At this level of analysis, Reza Shah Square, previously examined in its

spatialized form, is reconsidered within its specific historical context, namely the first half of Mohammad Reza Shah’s reign. Within this historical framework, the focus shifts to the particular needs and objectives of the Second Pahlavi regime concerning the representation of his father’s authority. This imperative arose from both the socio-political climate of the period and the personal disposition of Mohammad Reza Shah himself. These conditions effectively transformed the public memory of Reza Shah into an instrument for consolidating the second Pahlavi monarch’s precarious position. As Zonis (1991/1992, 79) observes, during the initial years of Mohammad Reza Shah’s rule, his father’s legacy considerably shaped public acceptance of his reign.

It is argued here that an iconographic analysis of the square within this historical context reveals deeper ideological implications. This was a period in which Mohammad Reza Shah, confronted with numerous political crises, relied upon symbolic instruments to legitimize his authority. Given that these squares were largely constructed during the first half of his reign, their proliferation can be interpreted as a strategic measure to consolidate the young Shah’s authority and cultivate public legitimacy. To address this need, Reza Shah Squares were replicated throughout the country and instrumentalized in the legitimization of the new monarch. This process was effectuated

Table 1. Alignment of Mohammad Reza Shah’s Conceptualization of His Father with the Semiotics of Reza Shah Square. Source: Authors.

Favorite Image of the Father	Most Important Indicators of Reza Shah	Symbols Represented in the Square
Authoritarian Modernity	Modernist	Modernism of the Square
	Central to Affairs	Centrality of the Square
Domineering	Dignified	Solidity and Stability of the Square
	Dominant Personality	Low-to-High Perspective of the Square
Military Order and Hierarchy	Organized and Precise	Geometric Symmetry in the Square’s Design
	Pragmatic and Resolute	Realism in the Square’s Design

Table 2. The Spatial Antagonism Between the Historic Urban Fabric and Reza Shah Square and Its Symbolic Import. Source: Authors.

Semiotics of the Old Urban Fabric	Semiotics of Reza Shah Square	Representation by the Square	Final Imagery
Traditional and Spontaneous	Modern and Planned	The Modernism-seeking Agenda of Reza Shah	Reza Shah as a Potent Monarch
Decentralized	Centralized	The Centralizing Tendency of Reza Shah	
Lack of Solidity	Solid and Stable	The Firmness of Reza Shah	
Horizontal and Non-dominant	Vertical and Dominant	The Dominance-seeking Nature of Reza Shah	
Without Order	Ordered	The Order-seeking Nature of Reza Shah	
Abstract	Realistic	The Pragmatism and Resolute Determination of Reza Shah	

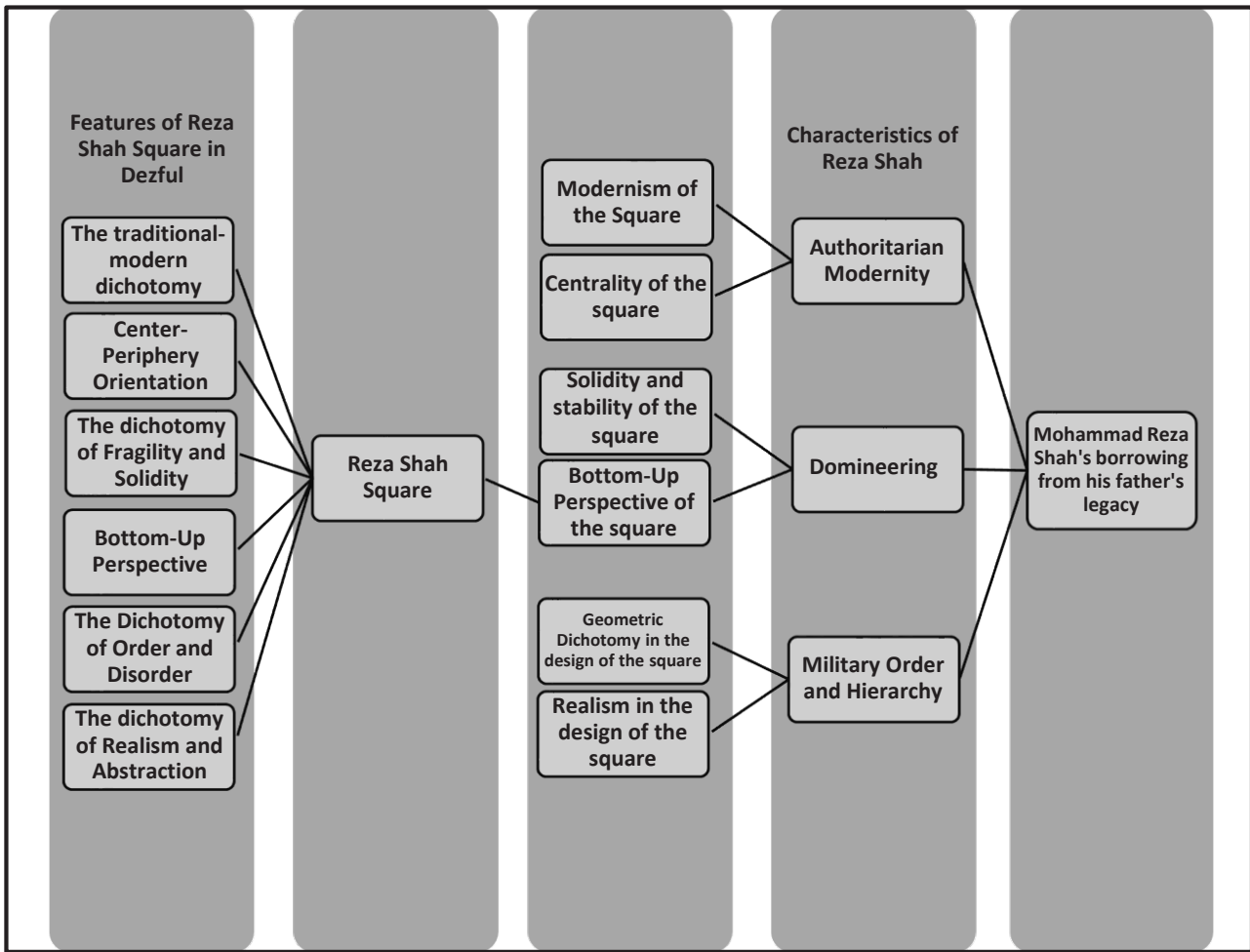


Fig. 5. Analytical Model of the Process of Authority Borrowing from the Public Memory of the First Pahlavi. Source: Authors.

through a mechanism termed “authority borrowing” (Fig. 5).

### Conclusion

Employing an iconographic approach, this study examines how squares from the Reza Shah era were utilized to consolidate the authority of Mohammad Reza Shah. It investigates their role in shaping the memorial landscape of cities during the second Pahlavi period, using Dezful as a case study. Within this framework, Reza Shah Square in Dezful was analyzed within a distinct historical context, namely, the first half of Mohammad Reza Shah’s reign. This analysis situated the period within its socio-political context and focused on the young Shah’s unique perception of his father’s political legacy. The central thesis of this research posits that the construction of squares and commemorative statues dedicated to the

first Pahlavi monarch, particularly during the initial decades of Mohammad Reza Shah’s rule, served a function that extended beyond mere homage to Reza Shah. Fundamentally, the symbolic stature of Reza Shah as an authoritative and domineering figure was transmuted into a potent iconic signifier. Through a comparative analysis of this constructed image against the semiotic characteristics inherent in Reza Shah Square, this study identified substantial parallels and correspondences. These correspondences lie between the attributes that Mohammad Reza Shah ascribed to his father and the physical design of the square, coupled with the statuary representation of Reza Shah himself.

However, our analysis of Reza Shah Square and its radial streets proceeded not by examining it as an isolated, island-like entity, but through its intertextual dialogue with its immediate context, the city’s historic

urban fabric. From this dialectical engagement, a situated message is communicated to the observer: the representation of Reza Shah's authority within the urban landscape. This initial reading, however, appeared partial, temporally frozen, and ultimately incomplete. To transcend this limitation, Reza Shah Square was re-situated within its specific socio-political context, with emphasis on the first half of Mohammad Reza Shah's rule. Within these historical conditions, the rationale underlying the younger Shah's decision to select his father as the primary subject for commemorative squares nationwide was critically examined. This imperative was driven by a confluence of critical geopolitical circumstances of the era and Mohammad Reza Shah's own personal and political characteristics. Consequently, and driven by this need, urban squares dedicated to Reza Shah were constructed throughout the country, predominantly during this period, with the strategic aim of harnessing public memory of the former monarch to consolidate legitimacy and power for the young This strategic instrumentalization of urban form and collective memory is conceptualized as a process of "authority borrowing."

Ultimately, this initiative proved unsuccessful due to a confluence of factors. These included the pervasive unpopularity of the squares' primary subject (Reza Shah), their emphasis on authoritarian hegemony rather than public persuasion, a confrontational and imposing design language, and their profound association with the state apparatus, among others. Considering the broader picture presented by this research, the fundamental element absent from the public sphere and from the memorial squares within the Iranian urban landscape of the second Pahlavi era can be identified as a disregard for the populace, their agency, their desires, and their right to participate in selecting their own memorial symbols (Author, Year). This critical deficit appears to have persisted beyond that historical moment. Subsequent rulers have consistently treated memorial sites and symbols not as vessels of collective memory and public will, but rather as instruments for instilling ideological conformity and exerting hegemonic

control over the civic body, effectively suppressing alternative narratives and expressions of identity (Author, Year).

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Endnotes

1. The square was situated at the junction of Pahlavi and Sirus Streets. The adjacent roads and passageways were predominantly named after figures from Ferdowsi's Shahnameh and ancient Persian kings, all of which converged into Pahlavi and Sirus Streets, channeling movement directly toward Reza Shah Square. Thus, the urban text encompassing the square also operated as an integral component of this semiotic system, further reinforcing its ideological message.

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