



Migrations and social mobility in greater Tehran : from ethnic coexistence to political divisions?

Bernard Hourcade

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Human Mobility and Multiethnic Coexistence in Middle Eastern Urban Societies 1 Tehran, Aleppo, Istanbul, and Beirut

Edited by Hidemitsu Kuroki



**Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (ILCAA)
Tokyo University of Foreign Studies
Tokyo 2015**



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Bernard Hourcade

MIGRATIONS AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN GREATER TEHRAN: FROM ETHNIC COEXISTENCE TO POLITICAL DIVISIONS?

Tehran is a new city in an old centralized empire. Shah Tahmasp, the Safavid ruler, has built strong walls in 1554, in order to transform the small city into a royal capital, but Esfahan became the centre of the new empire. For a long period of time, Tehran remained a poor small city on the foothills of the Alborz Mountains, unable to become the core of an economic and cultural region like Esfahan, Shiraz, or Kerman. The real history of Tehran began in 1785, when the first Qajar ruler, Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar decided to move its administration from Shiraz to this city of the central plateau, far from the numerous strong regional powers and from uncontrolled ethnic groups.¹

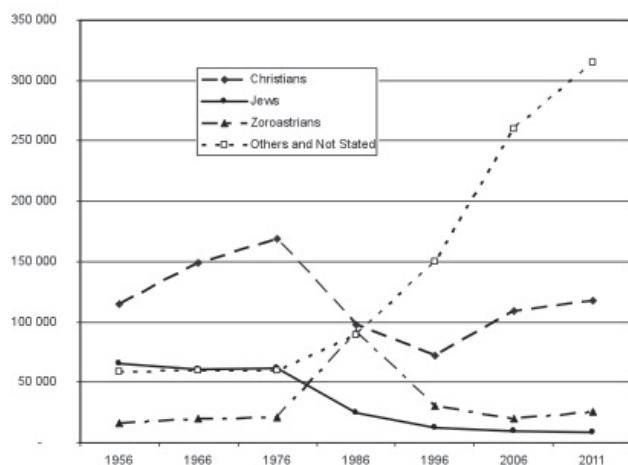
Since those times, the building of the society and the culture of this young capital city has been linked to the State, to the central government, and to the Iranian national history. The city of Tehran had little social autonomy; the migrants from the various provinces of the multiethnic Iranian empire, non-Muslim religious minorities, and the members of the new middle class using the opportunities of this rich oil country, were of course competing and sometimes opposed one another. However the presence and the power of the central State has played an efficient role in shaping the contemporary huge metropolis of Tehran, where more than twelve millions are living without major sectarian or ethnic conflicts. The Islamic revolution of 1979 has strengthened this dynamics of coexistence, in giving a leading role to national political, social and ideological issues. Today, Tehran is a central place for political conflicts. Is there any link between the ethnic and religious diversity of Tehran and Iran, and the increasing political conflicts inside the modern Iranian state and the large metropolis of Tehran?

THE RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND THE PROTECTION OF THE STATE

The non-Muslim religious minorities – Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians – played a major and well known role in the Iranian cultural and social history. Since the Constitution of 1908, they send five members to the Parliament. Until the middle of

the 20th century, they were numerous in many provincial cities and even in rural areas (Christian Chaldeans near Urmiah, Armenians in Tabriz and Esfahan, Zoroastrians in Yazd and Kerman, Jews near Hamedan...). Today, their number has declined and most of them have moved to the largest cities and especially to the city Tehran (76.4% of the Iranian Jews lived in Tehran in 2006). These non-Muslim communities are so small in number (138,490 individuals in 2011, or 398,041 with the “others” and “not stated” people, that is respectively only 0.2% and 0.6% of the total population of the country), that they are no longer a central political or social matter in Iran.² However, because they are a part of the Iranian national culture, and as a symbol for human right issues, these communities still have a preeminent position in the current social and political context of Iran.

IRAN	Christians	Jews	Zoroastrians	Others
1956	115,000	65,000	16,000	59,000
1966	149,000	61,000	20,000	60,000
1976	169,000	62,000	21,000	60,000
1986	98,000	25,000	91,000	89,000
1996	72,000	12,000	30,000	150,000
2006	109,415	9,252	19,823	259,551
2011	117,704	8,756	25,271	315,000
%				
1956	0.61	0.34	0.08	0.31
1966	0.58	0.24	0.08	0.23
1976	0.50	0.18	0.06	0.18
1986	0.20	0.05	0.18	0.18
1996	0.12	0.02	0.05	0.25
2006	0.16	0.01	0.03	0.37
2011	0.16	0.01	0.03	0.42
Province of Tehran				
2006	58,667	7,073	11,607	18,680
% of Iran	53.6	76.4	58.6	19.3

Table 1. The religious minorities in Iran 1956-2011.Source: Statistical Centre of Iran. *National census.***Fig. 1. Evolution of the religious minorities in Iran 1956- 2011**

Source: Statistical Centre of Iran. National census.

The decline is important for Jews, less for Christians. The number of Zoroastrians is stable (the high number in 1986 is due to a “nationalist” reaction to Islamism). The category of “others” and “not stated” has increased since the last three decades, perhaps due to a better census of the non-official religions (Baha’is, Sikhs, and Buddhist) and of the Sunni Muslim population.

Muslims who do not share the Shi’ite official faith, like the Ali-Allahi, numerous among the Kurds, and the Isma’ilis, are probably numbered among “other” religions. The same situation prevails for the members of Sufi orders having a strong public identity in some places (Gonabad, Mahan).

The case of the Sunni Muslim community is quite different since they are recognized as “Muslims,” members of the “umma,” as well as the Shi’ites, but they are not considered as an independent religious community, having specific rights or a public legal existence. In provinces where they are the majority (Kurds, Baluchs, Turkmens, and Arabs of the Persian Gulf), they have they own mosques, schools and community facilities, but in major cities of the Persian central plateau, especially in Tehran, they have no mosques, schools, or community centers.

These Muslim religious minorities have followers in Greater Tehran, and are probably more than the 18,680 people having declared an “other religion” in 2006. However, until now, they are not rooted in the history or the geography of the city. This question of the minority communities of Muslims, mainly Sunnis, is very complex and politically very sensitive, and will be discussed further in this article.

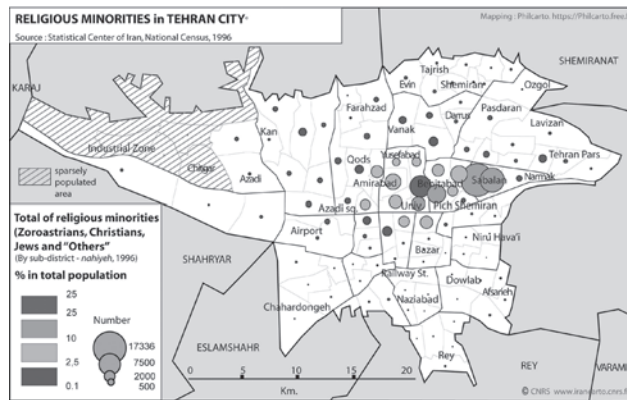


Fig. 2. The religious minorities in Tehran

This small group of only 96,000 people is living in almost all districts of Tehran metropolis (10 million inhabitants). However, very few live in the suburbs, and most of them have settled in a very limited area, in middle-class neighbourhoods of Northern central Tehran where they are more than 10% of the total population.

Until the first decades of the 20th century, Jews and Christians had to face the hostility, the forced conversions, and sometimes the massacres, in provinces as well as in Tehran, although there was never massive pogroms in Iran.³ Even if they used to live in the same neighbourhoods, but there was no formal “ghetto” in Iranian cities. In Tehran, the old Jewish quarter (*mahalleh yahudiān*) was located in Uladjan, and the Christians near Darvazeh Qazvin.⁴ Since Tehran was a “new” city” developed in relation with the central state, they were few, and their social, political, or economic role was limited, as well as their geographic visibility. The social landscape of the religious minorities was quite different in the old cities of the Middle East and of Iran (Esfahan, Shiraz, Mashhad, Hamedan, and Tabriz) where their activities and identity were more rooted in the urban history.

During the 20th century, the migration of the religious minorities towards the major urban centres, and especially Tehran, was first motivated by security matters, to get the protection from the State, from the administration and the police against uncontrolled popular local riots, but also for socio-cultural reasons. Indeed, the religious minorities were active members of the new middle class that was in the making since the end of the 19th century. The first modern schools were set up in provincial cities (Hamedan, Urmiah, Esfahan, Tabriz...) as well as in Tehran, by foreign religious organizations of Catholics (French Lazarists), Protestants (American or British), or Jews (Alliance Israélite Universelle). The Zoroastrians never gave up their relations with the large Parsi community of India. So, in spite of their pre-



7

but less expensive, suburbs of Western Greater Tehran, especially in Karaj, where the Christians from the old Christian communities of Kurdistan and Azerbaijan have settled, too.

Today, Behjatabad, with its modern high buildings, is the neighbourhood where this population is the most numerous (25% of the total population), but with no obvious sign of their presence. In the neighbourhoods where they are numerous, they are only about 10% of the total population. They look and behave like any other Iranian of the middle class. The new generations, which are less linked to their community, prefer to live independently, anywhere in the new areas of Tehran city. For the overwhelming majority of the population of Greater Tehran, the religious minorities do not exist in their daily life.

Like in the past years, coexistence is the rule under the Islamic Republic. These small communities are not a political risk for the new Shi'ite regime and may give in the international media a good image of the Islamic republic, since symbols matter in revolutionary times. The traditional Islamic legal status of "*dhimmi*," with protection but not full citizenship to the religious minorities, has been fully implemented. This ambiguous situation has brought deep concern among the non-Muslim communities. In spite of this "protection," the religious minorities had to face new difficulties.

During the previous decades, all communities had de facto access to all professional activities in the private or public sectors. This was no longer the case. The new authorities implemented a very strict nationalist and Islamic policy in order to cut the relations the religious minorities used to have with the branches of their community located abroad. A number of religious schools, managed by foreign staff, were closed. This nationalist policy has less affected the Zoroastrians than the Christians and, of course, the Jewish community, which had to face the toughest difficulties because of the new hostile policy of Iran concerning Israel. The traditional "ethnic" Christian communities like the Armenians have had less problems than the Protestant or Catholic groups attended by converted people, who could be sentenced to death according to the Islamic rule.

Actually, during the Iran-Iraq war and the first revolutionary years of the Islamic republic, many Iranians of the middle class shared the international culture and relations, and faced the same dramatic problems. The non-recognized communities, such as the Baha'is, and members of Sufi orders, were not protected by the status of *dhimmi* and suffered even more. Massive emigration affected the whole of this social group so much that, by choice, constraint, or by sense of survival, the coexistence with the dominant Shia culture and the state became a matter of fact. The Iranian authorities regularly pay tribute to the religious minorities. In 1991, President Mohammad Khatami visited the Great Synagogue of Tehran, in 2006, the

Municipality of Tehran has hanged up streamers along the avenues of the city centre in order to congratulate the Christians for Christmas.

THE ETHNIC DIVERSITY/ HOMOGENEITY OF TEHRAN

Before becoming the capital of Iran in the late 17th century, Tehran was a small city probably inhabited by a local population coming from the old city of Rey in the plain and from the valleys of central Alborz. The new Qajar dynasty had two regional roots: as a Turkish tribe, they spoke Azeri and had links with the provinces of Azerbaijan of Western Iran, and as a nomadic tribe migrating between central Alborz and the Caspian lowlands around Gorgân, they were close to the population of Caspian provinces. The crown prince being the ruler of Tabriz, every new king used to bring to Tehran all his staff, court, servants, and military forces⁶.

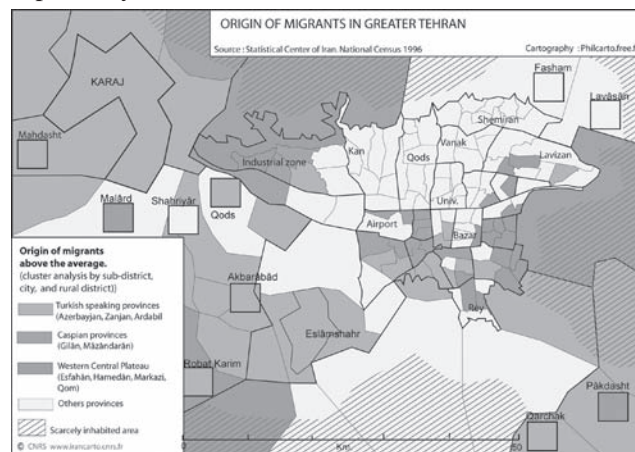
The relations with Caspian provinces were strengthened by the Pahlavi dynasty which was native of Mazandaran. Reza Shah, a former Iranian Cossack officer, confiscated the whole province as his private property and has had also strong relations with the province of Gilân where the Russians were very active. These facts explain why the main groups of migrants towards all the districts of Tehran were, and still are, from Turkish and Caspian origin. In addition, in order to control the tribes and local rulers of this multiethnic country, the Qajar kings used to bring to Tehran relatives of the powerful families from various provinces as “guests,” in fact as hostages. Most of them settled in the new capital which became rapidly, for all the provincial elites, a very attractive and unique place to get power in Iran, especially when the country started its modernization under the Pahlavi. Thus, migrants have come from most areas of Iran: people from the Persian cities of the central plateau (Esfahan, Hamedan, and Arak) are the third most important group; important groups are also coming from Kurdish provinces and from Khorasan. Only one fourth of the migrants are coming from other areas.

“Ethnic” Region	Number	%	Provinces
Turkish	186,000	23.7	East Azerbaijan, Ardebil, Zanjan
Caspian	109,000	13.9	Gilan , Mazandaran
Kurdish	72,000	9.2	West Azerbaijan, Kordestan Kermanshah, Ilam
Centre West	168,000	21.4	Esfahan, Hamedan, Markazi, Qom,
Other provinces	194,000	24.7	
Abroad	55,000	7.0	
TOTAL	784,000	100.0	

Table 2. Origins of the migrants of Greater Tehran (1996)

Greater Tehran is a new city where migrants are about 10% of the total population every ten years. Most of them come from the Central and from the North Western part of Iran. But today Tehran is the ethnic/regional mirror of Iran where all populations are mixed up.

These diverse flows of migrants are still active. The new comers are helped by relatives already settled in the city. They are considered as “migrants,” the people coming from other provinces and have settled in Tehran during the last 10 years (785,000 people in city of 9.6 million inhabitants in 1996, i.e. 8.2%). They are living near the terminal stations of the buses arriving from their provinces: people from Mazandaran in the South East, from Gilan near the Qazvin gate. Migrants of Turkish origin are living everywhere, since some of them belong to the elites and others to the workers. And of course, they are numerous in the rich northern areas, but also in the southern areas of Tehran, near the Bazar. During the last decades most of them have settled in the suburbs of Greater Tehran (Karaj, Eslamshahr, Pakdasht, and Qarchak) where living conditions are cheaper. Migrants coming from foreign countries are two types: the Afghan workers are living in South Tehran, and those coming back to Iran after studying abroad, or after some years of emigration in developed countries, are living in Shemiran and the northern well-off districts of the capital city.

**Fig. 4. The diverse location of migrants according to their origin in Greater Tehran in 1996.**

Migrants from all origins are mixed up in the largest part of Tehran city (the North and the center) and suburbs. Ethnic diversity prevails in Southern Tehran and eastern suburbs where the Turks, the Azeris, and more recently the Kurds, are numerous.

The location of settlements of the new migrants shows new social dynamics. Until the 1960s, the migrants used to settle only in the poor southern parts of Tehran city. This is no longer the case. They still live in the popular industrial districts (21% of the population in the *nahiyeh* of Irankhodrow, 16% in Doshan-Tapeh), but most of the new migrants are going to the north-central part of Tehran inhabited by the middle class. They are more than 15% of the total population in Yusefabad, Vanak or Amirabad. Migrants from various geographic or ethnic origins are no longer poor workers but mainly members of the new elites coming from all over the country. They live in the same neighbourhoods and seem to share the standard way of life for middle-class Tehran citizens.

This modest identity does not mean they have forgotten their original culture and ethnic identity. They remain proud of their provincial origin, and are very active in many cultural associations (*heyat*) and semi private circles (*dowreh*), gathering the people coming from various rural district or cities. But these activities are mainly historical, cultural, and less political than in the past.

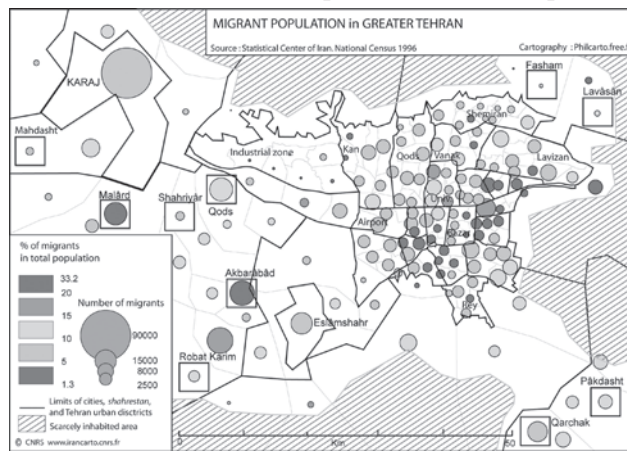


Fig. 5. Tehran city and suburbs. The new destinations of migrants.

Migrants settling in Central-Northern Tehran are numerous and belong to the middle class. The new cities of the suburbs have become the most important destination of new poor migrants. The ethnic composition remains the same, but the social discrepancies may appear.

Around one third of the population of Greater Tehran is now living in the suburbs. Karaj, one million inhabitants in 1996, is now the fifth largest city of Iran.⁷ In 1996, 53% of the migrants going to the province of Tehran have settled in Tehran city, but the new suburbs have become their main destination: 10% settled in Karaj and 37% in other cities and villages of the province. In addition, the growth of these suburbs is also due to people moving inside Tehran province (900,000 people).

At local scale, some neighbourhoods are of course inhabited by some specific ethnic community, but this new large city has become the mirror of a multiethnic Iran where communities are coexisting. Eslamshahr, divided in the 1980's between Kurdish and Turkish communities, has become a more balanced city where migrants are coming from various provinces⁸. This is not the case in some other places, where the large concentration of Turkish speaking migrants (80% in Akbarabad) may be at the origin of local conflicts with other populations. But these limited local riots never expand into global conflicts between ethnic groups at the scale of the whole metropolis.

The ethnic melting pot of Tehran seems to have become a reality thanks to the social dynamics of the middle class, but in the future, problems may come from the opposition between the city of Tehran, prestigious and well equipped, and the suburbs, where new comers are living without having no historical identity and are facing economic problems. The traditional ethnic coexistence that prevailed in Tehran's history may be instrumentalized by socio-economic discrepancies.

FROM SOCIAL DISCREPANCIES TO POLITICAL COMPETITION?

In the recent history of Tehran, there was no direct global conflict between ethnic or religious communities, but the capital city of Iran had to face several riots, upheavals, political conflicts, and even a revolution. Is there any correlation between the national, political, and social confrontations and the ethnic or religious diversity of Tehran?

The well known division of Tehran along Enqelab avenue, between the North inhabited by a modern well-off population and the South by a traditional and often poor population, was real, and still remains a part of the cultural and architectural identity of the city.⁹ However, this historical and cultural division has never coincided with any ethnic or religious division. The Islamic Revolution of 1978-1979 is a good demonstration of the consensus at work inside the city. To oppose the imperial regime, the liberals and middle class groups of the northern districts joined the more Islamic and traditional population of the South in huge demonstrations, on the "border," along Reza Shah avenue (renamed Enqelab: "Revolution"). The headquarter of the revolution was located at that time at Tehran University, on the same avenue, a symbol for the new middle class. There was no riot opposing ethnic groups, none of them being linked to the imperial regime nor to any religious or social group¹⁰.

MIGRATIONS AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN GREATER TEHRAN: FROM ETHNIC COEXISTENCE TO POLITICAL DIVISIONS?

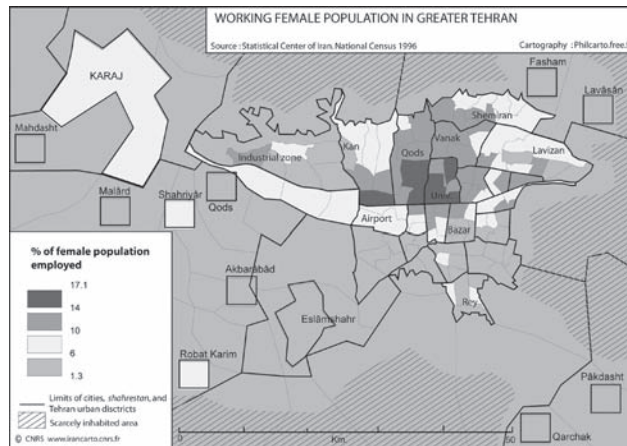


Fig. 6. The working female population in Greater Tehran.

The Middle class neighbourhoods of Tehran city seem to be an island in the metropolis, but change is at work in many cities and villages of the suburbs.

The social discrepancies in Greater Tehran remains a matter of concern, since the rapid transformations of the Iranian society during the last decades have increased the divisions inside the society, and strengthened the geographic segregations. The maps of the rate of working female population (average 7.5% in 1996) is a good indicator for the “modernity” of a society. The differences are quite important between the centre of Tehran city (more than 14% in the *nahiyehs* of Amirabad, Gisha, Park-Laleh, Behjatabad, and Argentine), where the religious minorities and new migrants live, and the poor places of southern Tehran (Nehmatabad and Yaftabad) and of the suburbs (Akbarabad, Kahrizak, Qods, Qarchak...). This geographic opposition between Tehran city and the suburbs is yet more complex. In some cities (Karaj, Shahriyar, and Robatkarim), in some poor neighbourhoods of Southern Tehran (Jey, Monirieh, Doshan-Tapeh, and Sizdah-Aban) and in almost the entire historic center (except the Bazar), the rate of working women in the total population is higher than the average, and the same as in some “modern” areas of northern Shemiran. This situation translates the deep social change at work in today's Iran and in Tehran as a “laboratory” or a model for the whole country. Ethnicity and sectarian issues might be instrumentalized in conflicts, but are marginalized when other major social or economic challenges are at stake.

The presidential election is a unique opportunity to see the conflicts, oppositions, competitions, problems, and discrepancies. The protest of June 2009 against the re-election of M. Ahmadinejad was strong, but the movement was only political and never linked to any sectarian or ethnic consideration. The Supreme

Leader Ali Khamene'i and the candidate Mir-Hosein Mussavi were both from Azeri origin. The geographic analysis of the election of Hassan Ruhani in 2013 confirms the absence of correlation between the vote and ethnicity, in spite of some strong local support for some candidates (Mohsen Reza'i and Mohamad-Baqer Qalibaf) getting less than 15% of the votes. The only exception was the Sunni areas (Kurdish and Baluch provinces), which gave a great support to the moderate candidate, for political and not ethnic reasons¹¹.

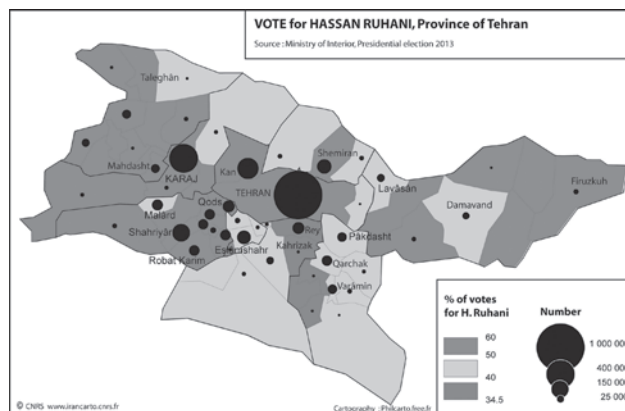


Fig. 7. The vote for Hassan Ruhani (2013)

In the province of Tehran, the opposition is strong between the areas supporting Hassan Ruhani in northern districts of Tehran (Kan and Shemiran), Karaj and western suburban areas, as well as the southern areas (Rey, Varamin, Eslamshahr...). The map shows a deep political division, but there is no evidence of any relation with the ethnic origins of migrants. On the contrary, the correlation is obvious with the socio-cultural discrepancies, which were pointed out about the working female population.

Today, in many respects, Tehran seems to be the mirror of the national political struggles of Iran: the conflicts are about the policy of the central state and not between communities. The rooted idea that the nation of Iran is in danger of being divided by regional dissident forces seems in contradiction with the coexistence at work in the capital city.

The only remaining question is the possible role of Sunni populations and regions. The Sunni Muslims cannot be compared with the three non-Muslim official

minorities, but they are *de facto* a religious minority having a very specific situation in a country where Shi'ism is the religion of the State. The question is not only a matter of religion and ethnicity, but of the overlapping of the two identities, since most of them are Kurds, Baluchs, Arabs, or Turkmens, and are about 12% of the total population of Iran.

These populations are few in Tehran where they have no specific mosques, and live in different areas of the metropolis (near Karaj, in both northern and southern Tehran). The problem is very serious in the provinces at national scale, but the fear of a confrontation seems limited since these populations are the strongest supporters of moderate Presidents Khatami and Ruhani who had a clear policy to support the middle class, and to give legitimate rights to the Sunni populations and to integrate these provinces in the national dynamics. The old tradition of consensus in the Iranian nationalism and the experience of religious and ethnic coexistence in Tehran seem to be strong enough to keep alive, and show as a model of the quiet identity of the Tehran's melting pot.

The presence of the government in Tehran gives obviously a better protection to religious minorities and ethnic groups, but at the same time, it stimulates the political and ideological debates and conflicts, especially since the times when Iran has become a republic, with many elections where economic and ideological issues seem to overcome traditional identities.

NOTES

- ¹ About the history of Tehran, see Ali Madanipour, *Tehran, the making of a metropolis* (New York: J. Wiley, 1998); Chahriar Adle and Bernard Hourcade (eds.), *Téhéran capitale bicentenaire*, (Paris-Téhéran: Institut Français de recherche en Iran, 1992), 386.
- ² The National Census of the Statistical Centre of Iran published also the data about "other" religions and "not stated" which were in 2006 two times more numerous than the three non-Muslim official minorities in Iran, but only 20% of the religious minorities in Greater Tehran.
- ³ About the Jews in Iran and of Tehran: Habib Levy, *Comprehensive history of the Jews of Iran, the outset of the diaspora*, (Costa Mesa : Mazda, 1999). About the Christians: Jean-Pierre Valogues, *Vie et mort des chrétiens d'Orient, des origines à nos jours*, (Paris, Fayard, 1994), and about Iran: passim and 767-795.
- ⁴ About the religious minorities in Iran and in the Muslim world the most comprehensive study is: Xavier de Planhol, *Les minorités en Islam; géographie politique et sociale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997).
- ⁵ About the migration and the settlement of the Assyrians in Tehran during the 1960s: Hubert de Mauroy, *Les Assyro-Chaldéens dans l'Iran d'aujourd'hui*, (Paris: Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1978).
- ⁶ About the migrations to Tehran: Bernard Hourcade, " D'où viennent les Téhéranais ? : Deux siècles de migrations vers Téhéran," *Luqman*, 19, 1, - 37- (2002-2003): 173-195.
- ⁷ About the social geography of Greater Tehran: Mohsen Habibi and Bernard Hourcade, *Atlas of Tehran Metropolis* (Tehran, TGIC, 2005). Also available on www.irancarto.cnrs.fr
- ⁸ Mohsen Habibi, " Eslamshahr, un nouveau type de banlieue à Téhéran," *Cahiers du Monde Turco-Iranien*, 21 (1996): 251-269.
- ⁹ Martin Seger, " Segregation of retail facilities and the bipolar city centre of Tehran ." in Adle and

Hourcade (eds.), *Téhéran capitale bicentenaire*: 281-297.

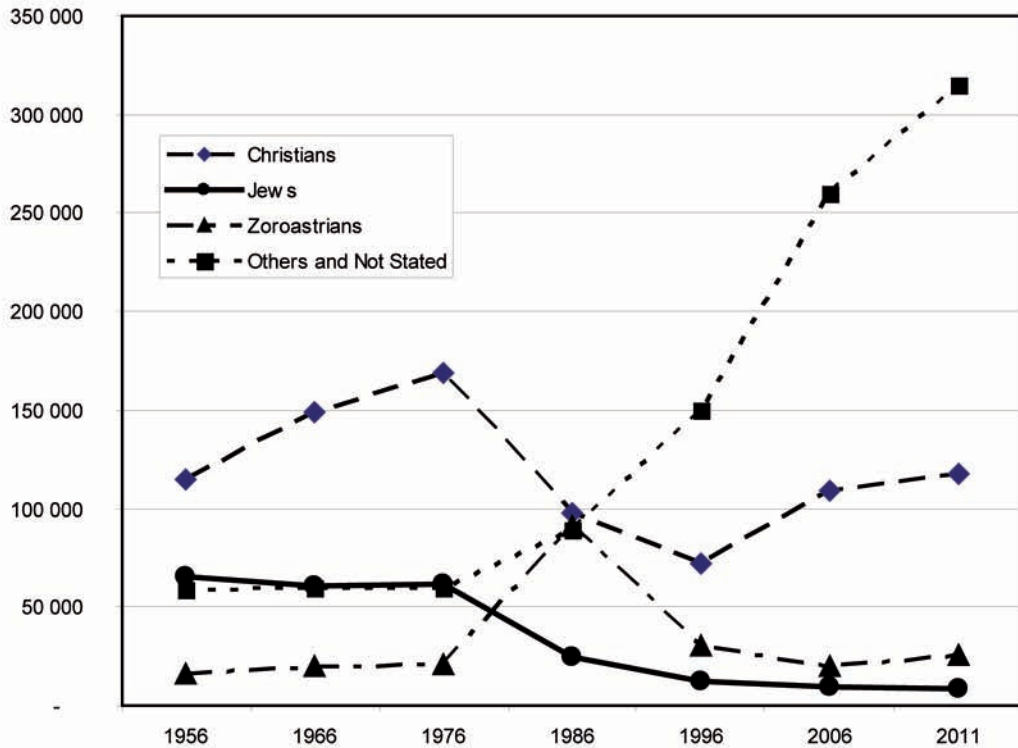
¹⁰ Bernard Hourcade, “Géographie de la révolution iranienne, l’Iran entre impérialisme et éclatement intérieur,” *Hérodote*, 18 (1980) : 16-45.

¹¹ A geographic analysis of the election is available on www.irancarto.cnrs.fr

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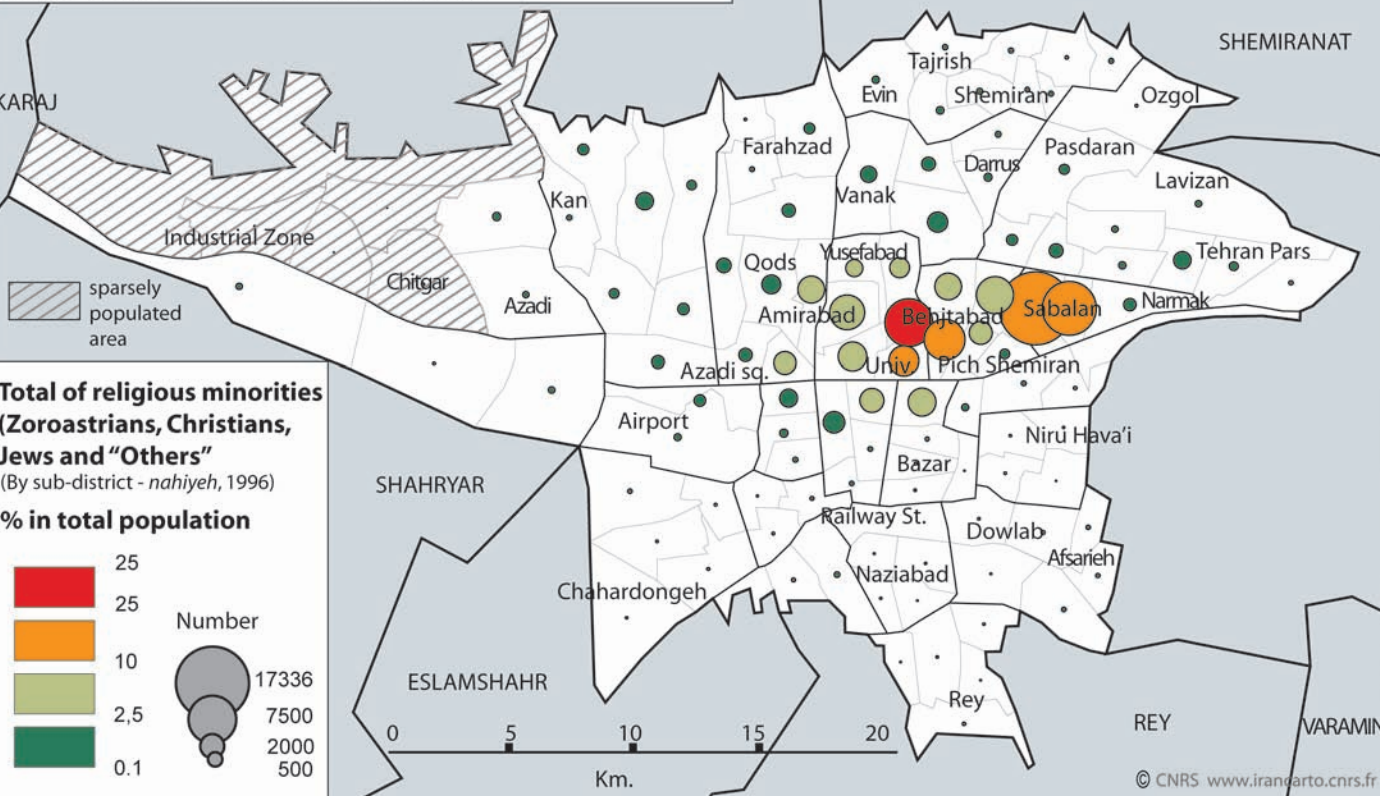
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RELIGIOUS MINORITIES in TEHRAN CITY*

Source : Statistical Center of Iran, National Census, 1996

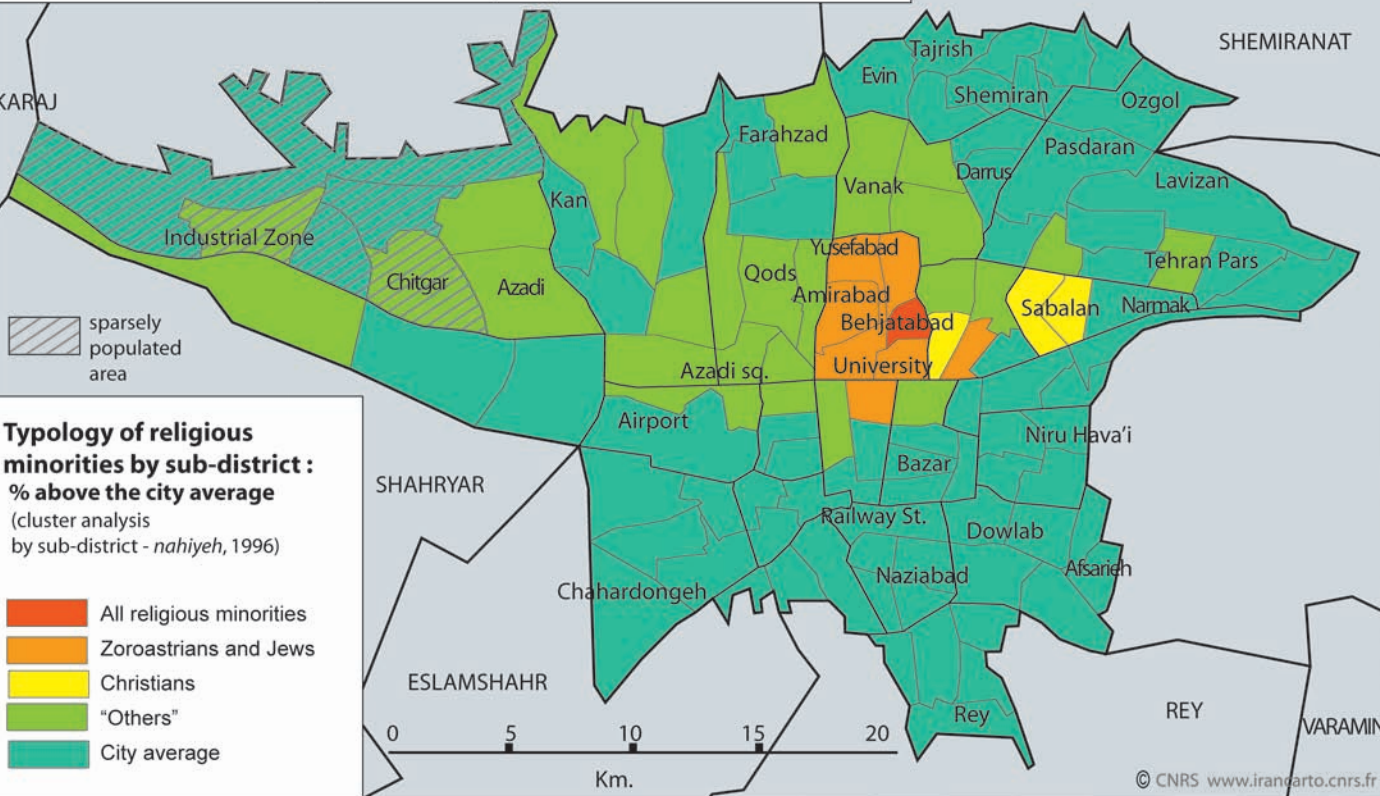
Mapping : Philcarto. <https://Philcarto.free.fr>



THE NEIGHBORHOODS OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES in TEHRAN CITY

Source : Statistical Center of Iran, National Census, 1996)

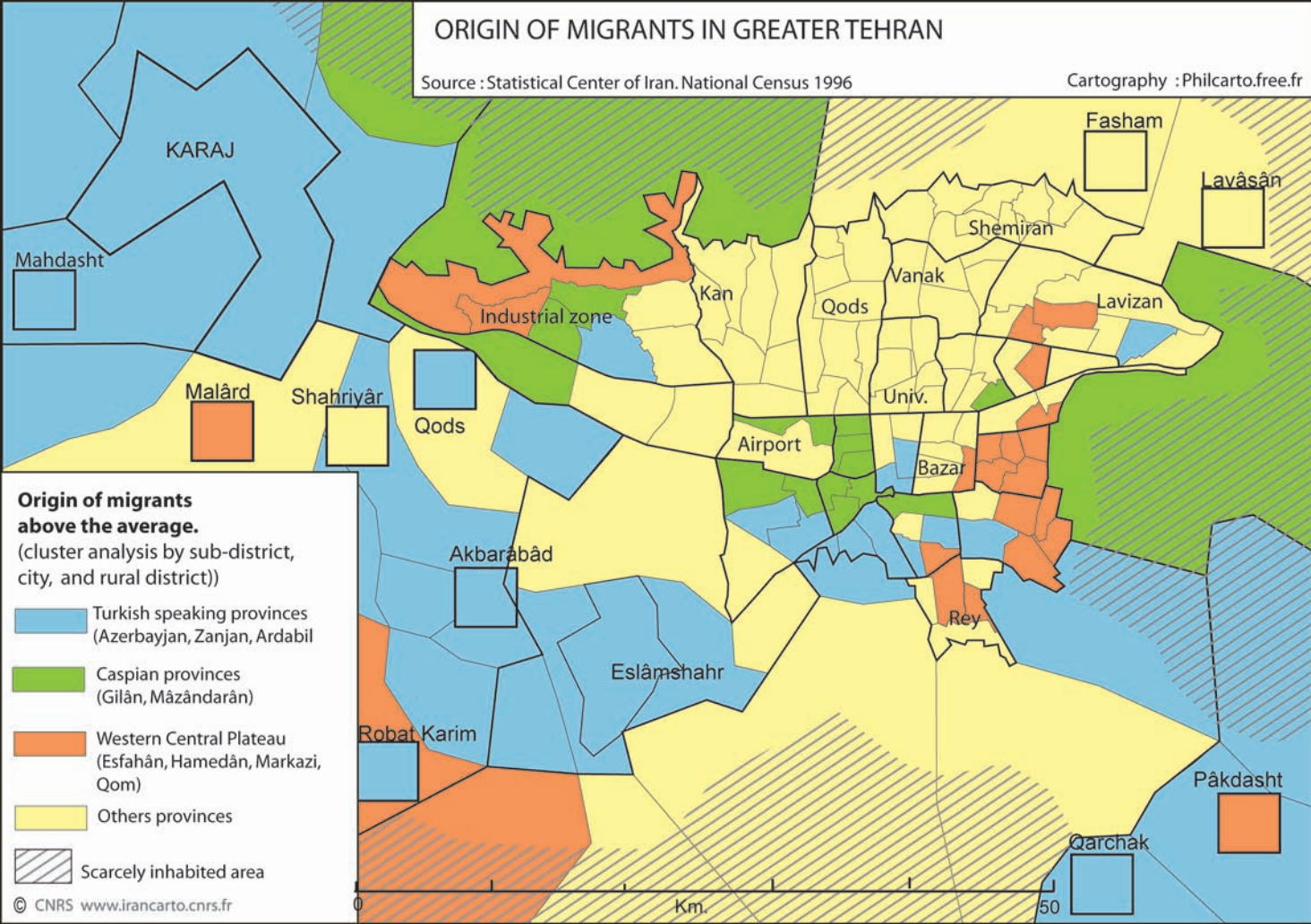
Mapping : Philcarto. <https://Philcarto.free.fr>



ORIGIN OF MIGRANTS IN GREATER TEHRAN

Source : Statistical Center of Iran. National Census 1996

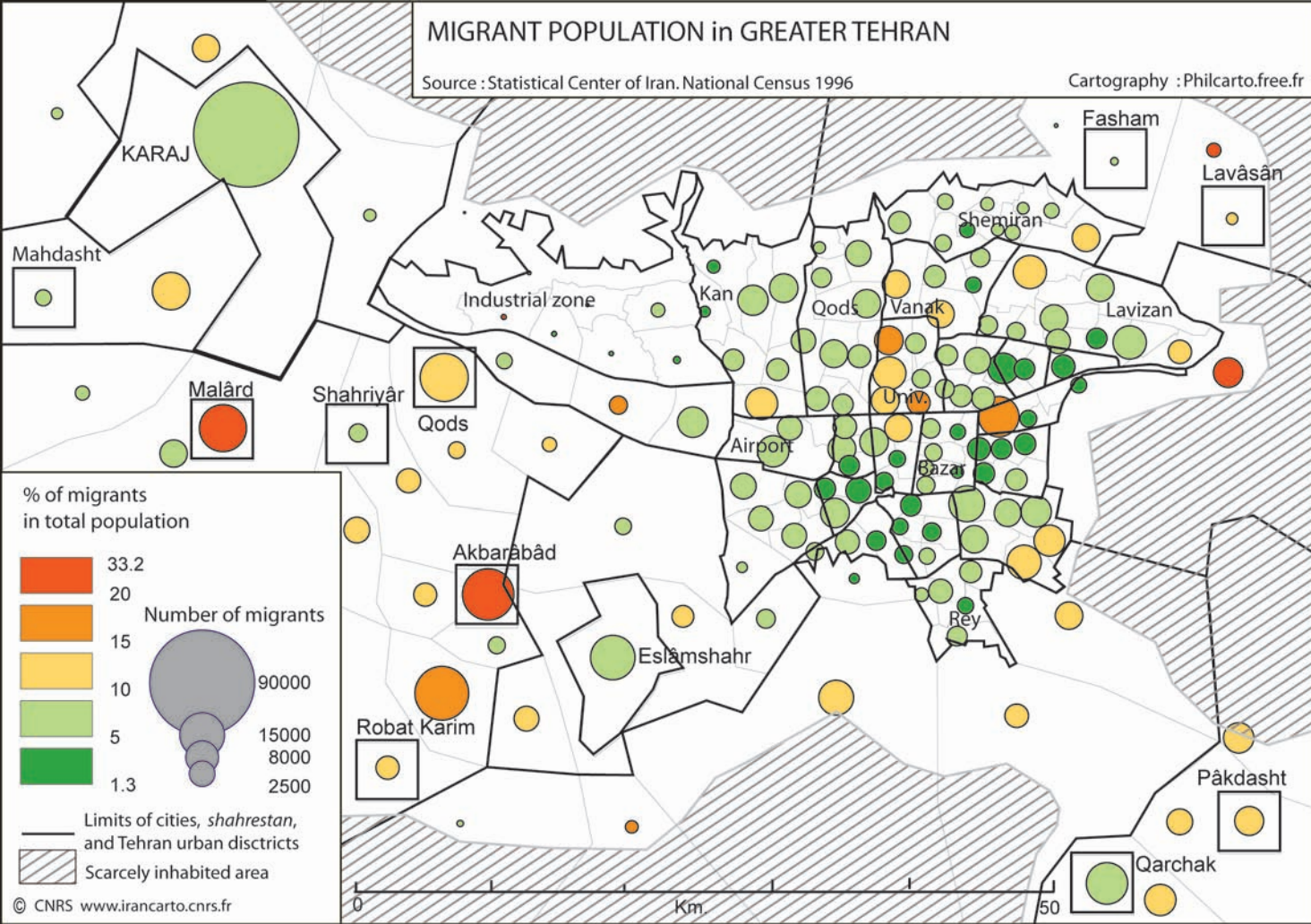
Cartography : Philcarto.free.fr



MIGRANT POPULATION in GREATER TEHRAN

Source : Statistical Center of Iran. National Census 1996

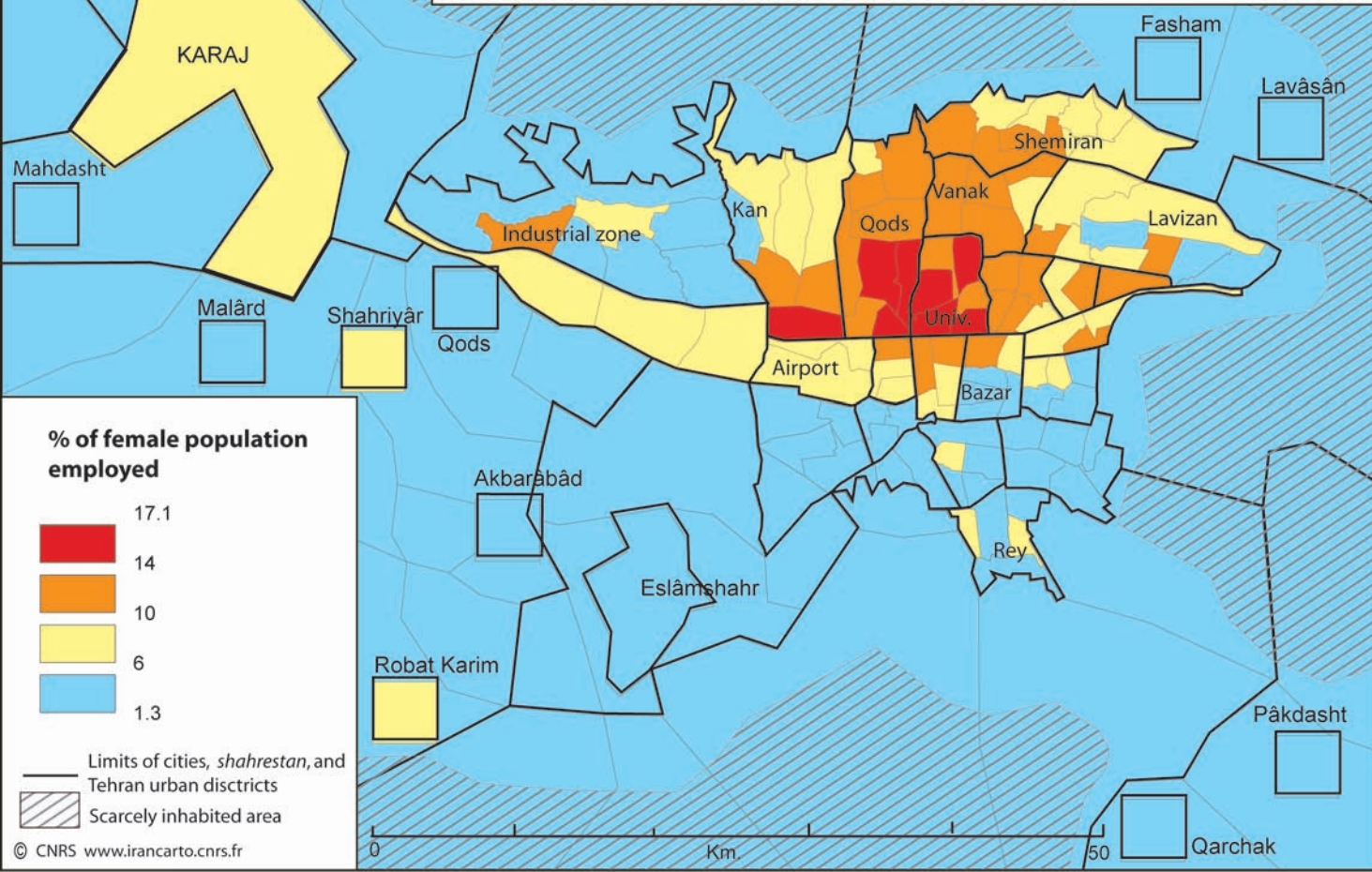
Cartography : Philcarto.free.fr



WORKING FEMALE POPULATION IN GREATER TEHRAN

Source : Statistical Center of Iran. National Census 1996

Cartography : Philcarto.free.fr



VOTE for HASSAN RUHANI, Province of Tehran

Source : Ministry of Interior, Presidential election 2013

