https://doi.org/10.22034/3.6.5 *Revitalization School*, *3*(6), 36-57., 2025

Original Research Article

Evaluation of Law as a Governance Tool in Informal Settlements
(Case study: B-Camp Sarbandar – Bandar Imam Khomeini)*

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 06 March 2025
Revised: 01 April 2025
Accepted: 15 May 2025
Online available: 22 May 2025

Keywords
Law and Regulations
Informal Settlement
Land Ownership
Governance
B-Camp Sarbandar

ABSTRACT

Informal settlements, shantytowns, slums, pit dwellings, and suburbanization have shaped part of Iran's problematic and deteriorated urban fabric. A part of the city that faces issues such as economic, social, cultural, health, and educational problems, which in a way reflects urban poverty. The formation of these settlements, which are also considered urban management challenges, has various causes, making them complex multidimensional issues. However, one of the most important underlying causes relates to the governance of the country. National governance, especially in the field of the economy, plays a significant role in the creation, persistence, or resolution of this urban problem. Therefore, the governance tool, namely "law," can be highly influential. Accordingly, in this research, through the method of collecting information and library documents, the research method of content analysis, and in combination with interviews with experts, urban managers, and residents during field visits, we seek to examine the legal causes related to the formation of this problem. Based on the findings of this study, the legal instrument, as one of the fundamental causes, has contributed to the creation or intensification of informal settlements in terms of formation, aggravation, persistence, and also their resolution. Therefore, by identifying legal gaps and refining them, an effective step can be taken toward solving the problem of informal settlements.

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[DOI: DOI: 10.22034/3.6.5]

* This article is derived from the research project "Landscape of Suffering: The Afflictions of Others' Development in the Local Community; Case Study: The City of Sarbandar"was conducted under the supervision of Dr. Seyyed Amir Mansouri at the Nazar Research Center for Art, Architecture, and Urbanism in March 2025.

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Introduction

One of the most important factors determining the quality of human life is the quality of the housing in which a person lives, as the need for shelter has been one of humanity's most fundamental needs since the beginning of creation, and access to it is considered one of the most basic human rights in civil societies. This right is also reflected in Articles 3 and 31 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979). However, despite this obvious, basic, legal, customary, and religious right, undesirable living conditions, known as "informal settlements," still exist in Iran. Informal settlements are one of the main manifestations of economic, social, cultural, health, and educational poverty, which highlight the imbalance in urban living standards. The Research Center of the Iranian Parliament introduces these settlements as prominent forms of urban poverty (Research Center of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, 2023).

Informal settlements, considered a type of deteriorated and problematic urban fabric, are the result of unbalanced urban development, which, according to Hajialiakbari (2017), is manifested in dysfunctional neighborhoods (deviation of the neighborhood from acceptable social behavioral norms—crime-prone areas, inadequate access to education, lack of an efficient housing market, cultural deprivation, and social and economic deterioration) and urban decline, meaning undesirable economic efficiency and social, economic, physical, and environmental exclusion (Hajialiakbari, 2017). Although different types of deteriorated urban fabric (intermediate, historical, and informal) cannot be compared due to differences in their nature and the challenges each faces, this type of deteriorated fabric may be considered the most complex and problematic, because alongside challenges such as impermeable streets, structural instability, and fragmentation (criteria of fabric deterioration according to the High Council of Architecture and Urban Planning, 2006) (Mansouri, 2020), the "issue of land ownership" is also present in this type of urban fabric.

In fact, what makes these settlements considered informal is the factor of "land ownership." The residents of these properties are not the legal owners of their land; rather, they have in some way appropriated part of the land and established a colony on it. The causes of the formation of these settlements are multiple, but what is clearly visible in these settlements is economic poverty. Controlling poverty requires proper resource management and its equitable distribution among all people. Therefore, the main causes must be sought in national governance, which is aligned with the three branches of government at three levels: legislation (the Islamic Consultative Assembly as the leading legislative body and other legislative organizations and institutions), execution and management (the executive branch, primarily the government, and other affiliated agencies and organizations), and oversight of the proper implementation of the law by the executor (the judiciary). Currently, according to the statistics of the Iran Urban Regeneration Company in Mehr 1402 (October 2023), the population residing in dysfunctional urban fabrics is 19,841,679 people, 32.1% of whom live in peripheral and informal areas. Therefore, we are facing a very large population of citizens who do not have a share of the city. On the other hand, according to the 1401 (2022–2023) statistics of the Secretariat of the National Sustainable Urban Regeneration Headquarters, the population living in these settlements is 6,226,377 people within an area of 59,381 hectares, indicating a high population density in a limited area, which, alongside the lack of effective facilities and infrastructure, exacerbates the problems (Research Center of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, 2023).

Discussion of the impact of legal governance on the country's macroeconomy and its manifestation in urban poverty is beyond the scope and subject of this research, as this issue has many dimensions. If the scope of the study is limited solely to the impact of laws in terms of land ownership and the legal management of space (the effect of laws on issues related to space management) in relation to informal settlements, the objective of this research will be achieved. Therefore, the main issue of the present study is the impact of laws on informal settlements, where the laws are selected and analyzed according to two keywords: "land ownership" (as the distinguishing factor of informal settlements from other types of housing) and "informal settlement."

Research Question

How can laws affect informal settlements? On which aspects will this influence be applied?

Research Method

Due to the nature of this study, it requires the library-based study of laws and documents. To this end, laws, regulations, and documents that, in accordance with the research keywords (land, land ownership, informal settlements, and their regeneration), have directly or indirectly affected informal settlements have been extracted, analyzed, and categorized from legal texts. Therefore, the data collection method is library document study, and the research method is based on the analysis, categorization, and reasoning of these data. To complement the research process, interviews were conducted with some residents (stakeholders) and sessions held with experts and urban managers (including the mayor and his deputies, a

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representative of the Housing Foundation as one of the main authorities responsible for housing the residents of informal settlements in the area, and a representative of the Imam Ali Construction Headquarters, which after the 2019–2020 flood provided housing for the victims, most of whom were residents of these informal settlements). These were used to complement field visits and examine the impact of upstream laws on the lives of informal settlement residents in Bi Camp, with examples from field observations in Sarbandar presented to support the arguments made.

Interviews with residents, experts, and urban managers helped understand, verify, and evaluate the extent of proper and complete implementation of laws in practice and the effectiveness of laws in reality, thereby advancing the research process. Therefore, the data collection method is the study of library documents and records, and the research method is based on reasoning, analysis, and categorization of the laws obtained from the processing of library data, interviews, and field visits. This constitutes a qualitative strategic approach, using logical reasoning for analysis, and the research method is "content and thematic analysis."

In the main discussion section, the theoretical foundations regarding concepts related to deteriorated urban fabrics and informal settlements are first presented. In this section, only brief definitions and introductions of concepts are provided to advance the main research concern, which is "the impact of laws on informal settlements," and extensive discussion of other definitions and theories on these topics is avoided. Therefore, the brief introduction and discussion of concepts in the theoretical foundations section serve solely to define the literature terms for the subsequent sections of the study (although these definitions are also subject to critique, and other theories are mentioned).

In the following section, existing laws are examined through two milestones that brought significant transformation to the issue of land and land ownership in Iran: land reforms with a focus on agricultural development, and then oil-based development as the first major national development affecting land. By analyzing and reviewing existing laws from the Qajar period to the present, those laws that have directly or indirectly influenced land, land ownership, and informal settlements are examined, analyzed, and categorized to form the foundation of the current study. The legal analysis constitutes the main framework of the research background, as a large part of the present study is based on laws and documents, which are analyzed in the section "History of Land, Its Ownership, and the Story of Informal Settlements." Other aspects of the research background are presented in the theoretical foundations section as definitions and theories relevant to the topic.

To make the concepts clearer and familiarize the audience with the key terms of the study while focusing their attention on aspects of the broad concepts of laws and informal settlements sought by the authors, concepts are first presented within the theoretical foundations section, followed by the research background. This approach clarifies the authors' intended points for the audience.

Finally, based on the analyses conducted, the areas where laws can affect informal settlements are presented in a model titled "Positions of Legal Impact on Informal Settlements" as a research finding. A list of causes of legal inefficiency that have affected the issue of informal settlements is also provided, representing the first step of problem identification in the path to solving the issue, and paving the way for future research and the resolution of legal challenges.

Theoretical Foundations

• Deteriorated Urban Fabric

Deteriorated urban fabric, inefficient fabric, problematic fabric, or the various terms found in the country's regeneration literature all refer to one of the most difficult and complex urban challenges. According to the definition provided by the High Council of Architecture and Urban Planning (2006), deteriorated fabric is an area of the city in which most plots (more than 51%) simultaneously possess three characteristics: fragmentation (plots under 211 square meters), impermeability (streets narrower than 6 meters), and structural instability (lack of concrete, metal, composite, or any durable framework) (Mansouri, 2020). A fabric in which more than 50% of plots meet all three criteria simultaneously is called "approved deteriorated urban fabric."

Although this definition is effective at the level of action and management prioritization—for allocating limited government resources and human capital it is inaccurate at the strategic and management level. In the event of hazards such as earthquakes, floods, etc., the only factor causing human and financial losses and destruction is structural instability. If only this indicator is considered, the severity of the situation would exceed what is reported in the statistics of approved deteriorated fabric according to the aforementioned definition, potentially leading to misidentification of problems. Among various definitions of deteriorated fabric, this 2006 law has been used as a reference for most regulations, and therefore, it is cited here despite the existence of other, sometimes more accurate, legal definitions.

In the "Law on the Support for the Revival, Rehabilitation, and Renovation of Deteriorated and Inefficient Urban Fabrics" ratified in 2010, deteriorated fabric is defined as follows: "Deteriorated and inefficient urban fabrics are areas of the city in which, over the years, their constituent elements—including above-ground and underground facilities, buildings, structures, streets, and access routes

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have become deteriorated and inefficient, and their residents suffer from multiple economic, social, cultural, and physical problems."

Problematic deteriorated fabrics, due to their various characteristics, face complex issues such as lack of urban services and infrastructure, insecurity and crime-prone areas, social-cultural fragmentation and lack of identity, economic poverty, illegal occupation of properties, or multi-family occupancy in a single housing unit, compared to other urban areas. These factors make such fabrics some of the most problematic and complex parts of cities.

Dysfunctional neighborhoods deviate from acceptable behavioral and social norms and, alongside physical-spatial deterioration, exhibit social, economic, and cultural decay, high crime rates, inadequate access to education, and a lack of an efficient housing market (Hajialiakbari, 2017).

Deteriorated fabrics can be classified into several types, the most important of which are intermediate deteriorated fabrics, historically valuable deteriorated fabrics, and informal settlements. Among these, given the main focus of the present research, a brief discussion of informal settlements will be presented below.

• Informal Settlements

According to the news portal of the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development (2014), "informal settlements refer to areas that accommodate rural migrants and marginalized urban populations or have emerged, mostly without permits, inside or outside the legal boundaries of cities, beyond formal and legal urban development planning" (Ministry of Roads and Urban Development News Portal, 2014). Parviz Piran believes that informal housing refers to the residential areas of a portion of the urban population, constructed by the residents themselves outside the formal housing and land market, based on their own rules and agreements (Piran, 2002, 8).

As the name of these settlements indicates, the nature of this type of housing is not legally defined; therefore, this type of living does not grant any legal rights to its occupants. The key concept in this type of settlement is "land ownership." Residents of these settlements merely occupy the land without having any legal rights over it. Consequently, urban management often withholds services from them, resulting in a living environment lacking basic and essential services such as road networks, electricity, gas, water and sewage, telephone, and municipal services. According to the definition provided by the Research Center of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (2023) in the National Document for Empowerment and Organization of Informal Settlements, informal settlements are: "neighborhoods and areas that predominantly accommodate migrants and marginalized populations, formed without permits and outside formal and legal planning, within or outside the city boundaries, and possessing [... features approved by the High Council of Urban Planning and Architecture (2021)]" (Research Center of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, 2023).

If we compare this type of settlement with other forms of deteriorated urban fabric, it can be said that, alongside the problems commonly observed in most deteriorated fabrics, the occupants of these areas do not even own their land or homes, which deprives them of even minimal urban services. The fact that these individuals, without ownership or payment, have occupied a portion of urban (within the city) or non-urban land and constructed buildings on it raises questions about the legality and legitimacy of their actions, and whether rights should be granted to them. The root of these questions lies in national governance, particularly in the economic sector, which is beyond the scope of this discussion. However, what can be stated here is that unbalanced urban development can exacerbate this issue.

• Unbalanced Development

The essence of existence is founded on development and progress; this is why the universe is constantly evolving and transforming. Humans must also keep pace with this cycle, as failure to do so may result in elimination in the struggle for survival. Therefore, development and progress are essential for human life. When this effort is directed toward improving welfare and quality of life, its importance becomes even greater. This led humanity to achieve industrial development. With the discovery of steam power and the advent of the Industrial Revolution, human life experienced one of its major civilizational turning points.

The achievements of this development must be distributed among stakeholders proportionally to their potential and capacities in a balanced manner (not necessarily equally or identically). On the other hand, alongside the benefits and profits of industrial development, there are always side effects, which often occur at the site of development and must be continuously monitored and controlled to prevent excess. These side effects typically impact the climatic, natural, and social structures of their environment. If this balance is disrupted, and the benefits and profits of development accrue only to certain individuals or sectors while the burdens fall on others—particularly the local community—development becomes unbalanced.

The same principle applies in cities. If urban facilities, services, and infrastructure are allocated only to certain areas while others are deprived, urban development occurs in an unbalanced manner. According to Hajialiakbari (2017), such areas experience urban decline (undesirable economic efficiency and physical, environmental, social, and economic exclusion). In both cases, unbalanced development is undesirable.

In equivalent terms, these areas suffer from urban lag.

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They are parts of the city that have fallen behind the urban development process (a place left behind in time, indicating a lack of social and urban justice). These areas often exhibit characteristics such as poverty and vulnerability, lack of social status, prevalence of social disorders, lack of hope for the future, and absence of infrastructure suited to contemporary urban life (Sepanlou & Ahmadian, 2017). To address this issue and gain the satisfaction of the local community, the concept of the "right to development" has been proposed to help compensate for some of these deficiencies.

Right to Development

As previously mentioned, development, alongside its benefits, also creates problems for the context in which it occurs. Within this framework, a concept in urban development emerges known as "Transfer of Development Rights" (TDR). "Transfer of development rights is a market-based tool that aims to protect development in specific locations while allowing development to occur in other designated areas" (Research Center of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, 2024). In a sense, TDR seeks to return rights to people that may have been lost due to development, thereby gaining their consent to forgo personal benefit in favor of public interest through the use of TDR.

For example, when a house is located in an area designated for road construction, urban management must demolish that house. To gain the owner's consent, compensation or incentives are provided, so that in exchange for the demolition of all or part of their property, the owner accepts the urban development and relinquishes their rights in favor of the public interest, receiving development rights in return. This principle is also applied in industrial development, where industries are required to allocate a percentage of their profits to stakeholders in compensation for the damages caused to their context. This practice promotes social justice and partially mitigates the adverse effects of development.

In the following, the concept of TDR will be examined in two areas: first, in informal settlements as an incentive for renovation and homeownership (formalizing their property rights), and second, in the "development rights that industrial developers must provide to their context."

Research Background

Extensive research has been conducted on informal settlements; however, in this section, given the focus of the present study, both domestic and international studies on the impact of laws on informal settlements are reviewed. In the global literature, the examination of the role of laws in informal settlements began after the 1960s, considering the effects of "national policies" regarding land laws, ownership, construction regulations, and approaches to formalization/removal/rehabilitation on the formation and evolution of informal settlements.

Among the first studies in this field, Charles Abrams (1964) argued that national housing and land policies (ownership laws, state housing programs, construction regulations) play a decisive role in the growth or control of informal settlements. He considered the shortage of urban housing not merely a matter of insufficient units but directly the result of "institutional structures and national policies," meaning that manifestations of power through laws can open or close access to housing for different social groups. For example, land and ownership laws can deny the poor access to urban land, pushing them to the margins. He posited that informal settlements are not merely a consequence of poverty but are born from "national policies" and the "legal structure." However, the limitation of this research lies in its top-down urban renewal perspective, overlooking the role of the local community and other factors affecting the formation of informal settlements.

Blanco (1982) examined the impact of laws on informal settlements, attempting to understand how laws in developing countries strengthen or weaken informal settlements. He highlighted that: (1) laws aimed at legalizing informal settlements often result in public dissatisfaction, and (2) laws are not designed according to the needs of residents, sometimes exacerbating the problem. This study is one of the foundational works in the field, but its lack of a comprehensive and multi-dimensional perspective on the long-term effects of laws and the capacities of place is considered a weakness.

Kuyucu (2014) examined the role of interpretable laws, legal gaps, and ambiguities in enabling the misuse of laws by authorities, creating injustice and inequality, and subsequently expanding informal settlements. However, this study's limitation was its focus solely on the interpretability of laws without a multi-dimensional analysis.

Van Oostrum and Shafique (2023) explored the role of regulations in upgrading marginalized areas and emphasized the importance of internal lawmaking and self-regulatory legal frameworks for informal settlements. Among their findings, laws were criticized for being either excessively strict or overly flexible, and three approaches were suggested to improve informal settlements: (1) lowering standards, (2) relational laws, and (3) neighborhood agreements. The limitation of this research lies in providing recommendations without adopting a holistic view of the subject.

In domestic studies, the explicit link between policy and national law with informal settlements entered the policy agenda in the late 1990s through the "National Document for Empowerment and Organization of Informal Settlements" (2003) and later progressed to

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the evaluation of these laws. Eskandari Dorbati et al. (2022) examined land laws from the Qajar period to the post-revolutionary era, exploring the roots of informal settlements in connection with land ownership laws and offering solutions to prevent their formation. However, their study did not analyze recent laws that exacerbate the establishment of informal settlements.

Farahani (2023) analyzed government housing policies for low-income and vulnerable groups in the Seventh Five-Year Development Plan. He identified weaknesses such as a lack of an integrated housing policy, absence of a precise definition of housing affordability, neglect of rental housing, insufficient attention to low-income groups, population crises, and homelessness. However, he did not address the issue of informal settlements in the program or propose solutions for their formation.

Jalili Sadrabad et al. (2023) addressed fundamental challenges in legislation related to informal settlements but did not examine laws that led to the formation or expansion of informal settlements. Their approach was comprehensive rather than holistic, and the absence of a multi-dimensional and integrated perspective limited the findings. In the present study, an effort is made to read the laws with a holistic perspective (Table 1).

Discussion

• Industry and Industrialization in Iran

Iran, as one of the richest and most resource-endowed countries in the world, occupies a special geographic and strategic position, making it a key point for industrial development as well as a transit hub. On the other hand, the social structure of Iran has historically consisted of various ethnic groups living relatively unitedly, which has shaped the country. Each group owned lands within its supervised area, engaging in pastoralism and occasionally agriculture (with much of their livelihood based on nomadism and livestock farming).

After the establishment of modern Iran during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi, and following a series of measures aimed at nation-building and unification under the Pahlavi state, the country witnessed its first historical turning point regarding "land ownership." Following the land reforms of 1960 (1339 SH), the concept of land and ownership acquired a new dimension, with ownership claims pursued systematically (previously, land ownership was based on trust and traditional systems within tribes, and no unified institution oversaw these lands). This initiative represents a major turning point in land ownership.

Additionally, in the effort to unify the country and establish modern Iran, as well as to weaken local powers and centralize authority, a policy called "Takht-e Qapu" was implemented in the 1920s under Reza Shah Pahlavi, aimed at sedentarizing nomadic tribes. This measure also stripped some tribes and ethnic groups of ownership of certain lands, though its effects were limited mainly to parts of urban lands (e.g., newly established tribal towns).

During the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the discovery and extraction of oil, followed by the nationalization of the oil industry (1950s, 1329 SH), marked another step toward development. This also constituted another turning point in land ownership. A new socio-economic class known as "industrial workers" migrated from villages to industrial cities for livelihood. These individuals required housing, leading to the emergence of workers' settlements near industrial sites. The creation of new cities also accommodated this new class (e.g., the construction of Abadan, Asaluyeh, or the Sarbandar section subject of this study among other later cities near southern industrial areas). One of the main causes of the emergence and intensification of informal settlements in cities is precisely this migration of villagers or residents from smaller towns to work in industries of larger cities, as resources, facilities, and opportunities were not properly distributed in the national system, resulting in an imbalance. Consequently, villagers or residents of small towns migrate to larger cities for better employment and resources, but lacking sufficient financial capacity, they are excluded from standard housing markets and compelled to reside in marginalized or informal settlements.

Haj-Yousefi (2002) (1381 SH) argues that the first waves of migration and the beginning of contemporary urbanization in Iran occurred between 1941 and 1953 (1320–1332 SH), when social and political disorder caused economic stagnation, halting development and urban renewal projects (this migration was not only to cities but also included rural-to-rural migration). Piran (1989) (1368 SH) considers land reforms a major reason for rural-to-urban migration and notes that urban growth in Iran until 1966 (1345 SH) favored small and medium-sized towns due to intra-provincial migration. He further states that from 1966 onwards, the intensification of integrating the national economy into the global economy, coupled with increased oil revenues, shifted urban development in favor of medium and large cities.

Taherkhani (2009) (1388 SH) notes that the occurrence of war and the issue of housing displaced populations in the 1980s (1360s SH) exacerbated settlement instability through forced migrations. However, it was mistakenly assumed that these problems would resolve automatically once conditions normalized. Consequently, policy neglect and sometimes denial of informal settlement formation allowed these settlements to emerge around various cities, intensifying urban poverty (the Sarbandar camp, as a case study, reflects similar issues).

However, informal settlements represent a highly complex problem with multiple dimensions, making management interventions challenging.

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Table 1. Summary of Research Background. Source: Authors.

Author / Year	Title	Explanations	Critique from the Perspective of Attention to Informal Settlements
Abrams (1964)	Human Effort to Find Shelter in an Urbanizing World	- Among the first studies conducted in this field - National housing and land policies (ownership laws, state housing programs, construction regulations) play a decisive role in the growth or control of informal settlements - Informal settlements are not merely a result of poverty, but are born from "national policies" and the "legal structure"	- Influenced by the concept of urban renewal and top-down planning - Lack of attention to the role of the local community and other factors affecting the formation of informal settlements
Blanco (1982)	Informal Sector: A Historical Perspective	- Examination of the impact of laws on informal settlements - Research findings: Laws attempt to legalize settlement in these areas, but increase public dissatisfaction / Laws are not adopted in accordance with the needs of the residents	Lack of a holistic perspective
Kuyucu (2014)	Law, Ownership, and Ambiguity: Uses and Abuses of Legal Ambiguity in the Reconstruction of Informal Settlements in Istanbul	Examining the role of interpretable laws, legal gaps, and ambiguities in enabling the misuse of laws by authorities, creating injustice and inequality, and subsequently expanding informal settlements	Sole focus on the interpretability of the law
Eskandari Dorbati et al. (2022)	Land Ownership and the Formation of Informal Settlements in Iran (1978–2021)	- Examining the roots of informal settlement in connection with land ownership laws - Research findings: Analysis of laws related to land ownership from the Qajar period to the post-revolutionary era - Providing solutions to prevent the formation of informal settlements	Lack of attention to recent decades of Iranian laws that have contributed to the intensification of informal settlement formation
Farahani (2023)	Review of the Seventh Development Plan Bill (1995): An Assessment from the Perspective of Housing Provision for Low-Income and Vulnerable Groups	- Analysis of government policies for housing low-income and vulnerable groups in the Seventh Five-Year Development Plan Bill - Research findings in the bill analysis: Lack of integrated housing policy / Absence of a precise definition of housing affordability / Neglect of rental housing / Neglect of low-income groups / Lack of attention to the population crisis and housing issues to address it / Lack of attention to the homeless	- Lack of proposed solutions to prevent the formation of informal settlements - Neglect of the overlooked housing conditions in informal settlements
Jalili Sadrabad et al. (2023)	Review of Policies and Laws for the Organization of Informal Settlements in Iran and Proposal for Legislative Revision of Empowerment and Organization Plans for Informal Settlements	Addressing fundamental challenges in legislation related to informal settlements	- Lack of attention to laws enacted that led to the formation of informal settlements and, consequently, neglect of laws that contribute to the expansion of informal settlements - Adopting a comprehensive perspective on laws rather than a holistic one
Van Oostrum & Shafique (2023)	Regulating Informal Settlements "From Within": The Necessity of Diversity in Applying Building Regulations to Improve Slums	- Examining the role of regulations in upgrading marginalized areas and emphasizing the importance of internal lawmaking / Reviewing the idea of self-regulatory laws as legislation for informal settlements - Research findings: Criticism of laws as either excessively strict or overly flexible - Proposing three approaches to improve the condition of informal settlements: lowering standards / relational laws/neighborhood agreements	Providing solutions merely as proposals without a holistic analysis as a response to improving informal settlements

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In the following section, the approaches taken toward these settlements are categorized and presented.

• Approaches to Informal Settlements

As previously mentioned, informal settlements, as a type of degraded urban fabric, alongside numerous disadvantages of deterioration and instability, also struggle with the issue of land ownership, making them one of the most complex problems of urban management. On the other hand, according to the law, these settlements are unofficial, and therefore urban management has no responsibility toward them and can save its budget, human resources, and management capacity to allocate them elsewhere in the city. On the other hand, although these settlements are unofficial, since they are part of the city system, they affect the city as a whole and cannot be ignored. This is a challenge that urban management always faces. Moreover, the residents of these settlements do not have legal rights to land ownership, but they do have human rights and the need for shelter, and according to the Constitution and by virtue of being human, they are entitled to housing. Responding to these dualities has led to different approaches adopted by urban management, which include two main approaches: "neglectful" and "active." The active approach itself is divided into the negative/destructive "coercive" approach and the positive "constructive" approach.

In urban management, initially, and before the revolution, a neglectful approach was adopted by establishing an organization aimed at urban beautification. In this approach, urban management essentially ignored and turned a blind eye to the existence of these settlements. For example, prior to the revolution, the route that took foreign dignitaries from the airport and the city gates (Shahyad/Azadi Tower) to their hotels was cleared of urban poverty in the form of informal settlements along the way. By hiding the problem from view, they approached it with neglect.

Over time, with the increase of these settlements (both in number and population), the neglectful method no longer worked because the life of these settlements affected the city, and a solution had to be found. On the other hand, the lack of a plan to control them encouraged further migration and informal settlement. More people migrated to these settlements and established their own order within the disorder. Crime, an increase in offenses, drug production and distribution, and the housing of illegal residents and offenders were only some of the safety problems of these self-built settlements. In addition, the economic, social, cultural, health, and educational deprivation made these areas places for producing antisocial individuals, which required supervision and control.

Subsequently, two approaches were put into practice according to the conditions and decisions of urban management. One is the coercive approach, which uses force and power to completely destroy these settlements, often full of corruption, to remove all traces of them. The other is the constructive approach, which involves programs, actions, facilities, and incentives to guide residents toward formal living. The advantage of the two active methods (coercive and constructive) over neglect is that, unlike neglect, in active methods, this type of settlement and its residents are recognized as part of the city and human life. Recognizing these people and places is the first important and effective step in addressing the problem of informal settlements.

Although the coercive approach has a much lower cost for urban management, it brings many disadvantages. By demolishing the homes of people who live in poor conditions due to economic poverty, it not only does not solve their housing problem, but it also removes their minimal shelter, pushing them further into poverty. Furthermore, these people, who were concentrated in one location according to minimum cultural, social, health, educational, and economic standards, disperse throughout the city. This spreads corruption and insecurity across the city, so the problem is not only unresolved but also scattered. Examples of this approach can be seen in the clearance and demolition of Khak-e Sefid neighborhood in Tehran (1379) and Chaman neighborhood in Kermanshah (1387).

In contrast, the positive constructive approach includes various methods, but in some cases, they share common features, such as providing various incentives, removing certain obstacles to facilitate implementation, providing grants, long-term low-interest loans, allocating land in exchange for current lands, participating in the construction of part of a new home, and land readjustment. This approach is undoubtedly the most appropriate because it not only recognizes the residents and grants them ownership rights, but it also facilitates construction and redevelopment and allows urban management to fulfill its social and human responsibilities. Attention to this effective and constructive method in the redevelopment of informal settlements seems obvious, but it also faces challenges in execution, and its cost is higher compared to the other two approaches (Fig. 1).

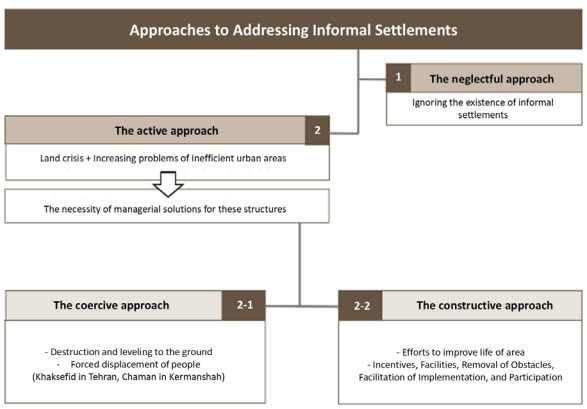


Fig. 1. Approaches to Addressing Informal Settlements. Source: Authors.

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Therefore, first, settlement in these areas must be recognized as legitimate and addressed as a problem. Then, the government must adopt positive approaches through budget allocation, support, incentives, facilities, and removing obstacles to redevelopment, guiding residents toward empowerment. But how will the government achieve this goal? Certainly, these measures involve costs. By examining the various causes of the formation and continuation of informal settlements, one can identify the different roles the government can play. One of the most fundamental, effective, and low-cost root problems that has created informal settlements in Iran is the management and the laws defined by governance. A role that the government can play (which is very effective and low-cost) is to remove the obstacles it has created. Laws are the tools to remove these obstacles.

• Law: A Governance Tool for Solving the Problem or Causing It!?

In general, the concept of "governance" from the World Bank's perspective refers to how the government acts and secures societal support in economic and social development (Pakzat, 2025), and broadly encompasses the management of resources and instruments at its disposal for running the country. One of these instruments in the hands of governance is the law. Law, as an effective and powerful tool in the hands of governance institutions (ranging from ministries and the Islamic Consultative Assembly to municipalities, city and village councils, governorates, district offices, and even consulting firms executing laws through urban projects), should function to create benefits for the country and its citizens while observing social justice and directing society toward progress and development.

Whenever law is discussed, it is important to recognize that it only takes meaning within a network of institutions, and its effectiveness depends on a systemic view that includes all members and monitors the mutual impact of their actions. In other words, the law has three essential components: legislation, enforcement, and supervision to ensure proper implementation. It is insufficient to examine only the legislator and its effects and expect the outcomes to reflect reality accurately.

Therefore, law as a tool of governance whether at the macro level of national governance (poverty, economy, and unequal resource distribution) or in the context of urban laws—can be considered one of the main reasons for the emergence and persistence of informal settlements. The rationale for this claim is that Sepanlou and Ahmadian (2017) identify the creators of urban development lag areas as the cycle of urban poverty production, macroeconomic disorder, unplanned population movement, accelerated growth, and the concentration of profitable activities in specific areas of the city (or specific cities), suggesting that poverty is the manifestation and face of urban lag. They argue that the cause of uneven growth is often urban profiteering and rent-seeking due to managerial deficiencies (Sepanlou & Ahmadian, 2017). Thus, governance and administration, both at the national macro level and at the urban micro level, are deficient, and the only mechanism that can guide them toward proper functioning is correct law and its full and accurate implementation.

In addition to its high potential effectiveness, the law may also be considered one of the most cost-effective tools. By amending laws that generate or exacerbate informal settlements, a significant step can be taken toward addressing this urban issue. Accordingly, the following section briefly examines and critiques the most important laws that have directly or indirectly impacted the issue of "informal settlements" and their defining factor: "land" and "land ownership." It is noteworthy that, based on the research project "Landscape of Suffering: The Burdens of Others' Development on the Local Community – Case Study: Bandar Imam Khomeini" (2024), for which this study is aligned, the focus here is solely on identifying the effects of laws on informal settlements. To avoid overlap with other research groups, this study does not address the implementation of laws in the form of programs, plans, actions, or regional and urban policies, which relate to the manner and quality of law enforcement.

Moreover, due to the macro-level impact of laws and their broad scale relative to the area under study (Camp B, Sarbandar), it is unrealistic to expect that each law can be directly traced to specific effects on Camp B. Rather, the legislative process can only be depicted as a whole, illustrating how it has contributed to the phenomenon of informal settlements in the country and specifically in Camp B.

• History of Land, Its Ownership, and the Story of Informal Settlements

The examination of laws governing land ownership dates back to the advent of sedentary human life. When humans began practicing agriculture, the Agricultural Revolution and the shift to permanent settlements can perhaps be considered the first turning point that brought land ownership into focus. However, reliable documents from that period to the contemporary era are scarce, and before the Qajar era, and even during the modernization of Iranian cities, urban areas did not face the kind of informal settlement phenomenon we see today. Therefore, in this study, the discussion of land and its ownership can be traced from the Qajar period onward. In Table 2 and Table 3, laws and their analyses from the reign of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar to the present are examined using the keywords: land, land ownership, and informal settlements.

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Table 2. Part One: Summary and Analysis of Laws and Legal Documents Related to Informal Settlements from the Qajar Period to the Present. Source: Authors.

Row	Law Title (Year of Enactment)	Description (Authors' Critique and Analysis)
1	"Law on the Transfer of Deceased Persons' Assets to the Government and Confiscation of Property" (Naser al-Din Shah)	Alongside the customary Islamic inheritance law for the deceased's property, estate, and land, it had an indirect impact on the issue of land ownership.
2	Law enacted by the First Parliament (1906/1285 SH).	Reference to private land ownership.
3	"Property Registration Law" (1931)	Refers to: property registration, boundary demarcation, and ownership registration; direct impact on land ownership *
4	"Civil Code" (1934-1935)	"Possession as ownership is evidence of ownership; unless proven otherwise" (Article 35). Determining the manner of personal land ownership through the revival of deceased estates. Defining the title deed (deed, official deed, and ordinary deed). Reference to the misuse of Articles 141, 142, and 35 by brokers, etc., and land possession around Tehran.
5	"Law on the Establishment of the Construction Bank and Its Statute" (1955)	- Confiscation of beneficiaries' ownership under the Civil Code (1934-1935) - Concentration of facilities and development on officially deeded properties by the aforementioned bank: a step toward more organized land ownership * - Transformation of settlements on government-allocated lands and wastelands, which lacked new ownership deeds for housing under this law, into informal settlements *
6	"Land Reform Law" (1960)	One of the most important causes of rural-to-urban migration is a factor in the settlement of low-income migrants, and one of the main reasons for the growth and persistence of informal settlements and the shortage of public lands for urban development.
7	"Law on the Reform of Lands of the Government, Municipality, Endowments, and Banks" (1960)	Amendment to the Land Reform Law (1960) - Obligating the government to determine the status of its lands - Stripping beneficiaries of ownership under the Civil Code (1934-1935) and the Land Reform Law (1960)
8	"Law on the Amendment of Certain Articles and the Addition of New Articles to the Municipality Law" (1955)	Use of the terms "old neighborhoods" and "ancient city neighborhoods" - Granting the municipality the discretion to purchase lands, properties, and houses in old and ancient city neighborhoods using the Land Acquisition Law (1960) and sell them according to approved municipal plans: the legal basis for the establishment of the Renovation Organization in Iran *
9	"Urban Renovation and Development Law" (1968)	Use of the term "neighborhood renovation" and obligating the municipality to provide renovation services to neighborhoods - Neglecting attention to worn-out, inefficient areas and informal settlements
10	"Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran" (1979)	- The highest macro-legal document of the country after the 1979 Revolution - Refers to two rights: "the right to housing" for all, and "prioritizing the more needy individuals" for housing - Does not explicitly specify who the more needy are, only mentions workers and villagers - Article 3: Creating a favorable environment for the growth of moral virtues, eliminating unjust discrimination, and providing fair opportunities for all - Article 31: The right to housing, proportionate to the needs of the individual and family, prioritizing the most needy; housing is considered not only as shelter but also as ensuring the social and economic security of the family, a place for leisure, and the development of moral virtues
11	"Law on the Abolition of Ownership of Urban Wastelands and the Quality of Their Development" (1979)	All ownership documents during the Pahlavi regime were annulled.
12	"Legal Bill on the Renewal of Contracts and the Leasing of Endowed Properties" (1979)	- In line with the previous law and the reforms of the new government - All official and private deeds annulled, and lease contracts renewed with the determination of fair rents

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Rest of Table 2.

Row	Law Title (Year of Enactment)	Description (Authors' Critique and Analysis)
13	"Urban Land Law" (1987)	- One of the milestones in the concept of land in urban management * Clarification of certain concepts related to urban land: Urban lands: Lands within the legal boundaries and protective perimeters of cities and towns Urban vacant lands: Lands without prior reclamation or development Fallow lands: Land with a history of development and reclamation, gradually becoming vacant (whether privately owned or not) Active lands: Land with a history of development and reclamation that remains active and utilized by the owner Transfer of ownership of all urban vacant lands (even with deeds and ownership) to the Islamic Republic government, except those transferred after 1978 Lack of clarification of concepts such as adequate housing and legitimate excuse Assignment of the determination of development and reclamation, and the classification of active and fallow lands from vacant lands, to the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development
14	Law on granting housing loans to war-displaced migrants by banks, etc. (1994)	- Enacted to emphasize the importance of issuing land preparation deeds in war-affected areas: granting housing loans to war-displaced migrants based on land allocation certificates issued by the Urban Land Organization.

Explanation: Items marked with * indicate milestones within the laws that have had significant impacts on "land," "land ownership," and "informal settlements."

In the first section, it was concluded that various laws have affected the issue of land and its ownership, and, in a way, these laws were influential in the initial formation and sometimes in the intensification of informal settlements. Next, it is necessary to examine laws that specifically refer to informal settlements. It is important to note, however, that until a certain period, the concept of deteriorated urban fabric, and particularly informal settlements, was not a subject of discussion and had no place in the literature of urban managers or in laws. Even after the deteriorated urban fabric was officially recognized, informal settlements continued to be largely ignored or demolished under neglectful or destructive approaches. In cases where actions were taken, informal settlements were often included under the general category of deteriorated urban fabric, although we now know that these two differ in nature and, consequently, in the way they should be treated. Therefore, they require specific laws of their own.

Table 3. Part Two: Summary and Analysis of Laws and Legal Documents Related to Informal Settlements from the Qajar Period to the Present. Source: Authors.

Row	Law Title (Year of Enactment)	Description (Authors' Critique and Analysis)
15	"National Document for the Empowerment and Organization of Informal Settlements" (2003)	- The first legal document concerning informal settlements * - Aimed at improving the quality of life of residents (with a focus on enhancing the living environment, increasing security, health, and human dignity) and preventing the expansion of informal settlements (through effective and coordinated national and local policies), empowering residents (by providing opportunities for their active participation in the process of organizing and improving their living area), and creating intersectoral coordination (for drafting and implementing policies and programs related to the organization of informal settlements) - Strategies to achieve objectives: identifying and defining informal settlement areas (for prioritization and intervention planning), utilizing internal and external financial resources (in compliance with regulations, to fund projects), drafting executive regulations (for the operation of headquarters and program implementation), and providing annual reports (to the government on the progress of programs and actions taken) - The executive structure of the plan includes three components: the National Headquarters for the Empowerment and Organization of Informal Settlements (composed of relevant ministers and heads of related organizations, chaired by the Minister of Housing and Urban Development), provincial headquarters (headed by the governor and including representatives of executive agencies, to implement programs at the provincial level), and the formation of local groups (consisting of 5 to 7 active residents from each neighborhood, to participate in implementing organizational projects) - Overlooked aspects: lack of a rights-based approach to residents, a purely physical perspective on the fabric without considering social, cultural, and economic dimensions, ambiguity in the definition and identification of informal settlements, and insufficient attention to mechanisms for providing sustainable housing, focusing only on improving current conditions, and limiting community participation to a basic level without the multipurpose role of local groups

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Rest of Table 3.

Row	Law Title (Year of Enactment)	Description (Authors' Critique and Analysis)
16	Fourth Five-Year Plan for Economic, Social, and Cultural Development of the Islamic Republic of Iran (2004)	Use of terms such as organizing peripheral textures, old city and village textures, and worn-out and inappropriate urban fabrics Attention to the social dimensions of informal settlements Emphasis on the rehabilitation and organization of worn-out and peripheral fabrics with a focus on empowering residents Obligating the Ministry of Interior to provide a comprehensive housing plan to strengthen housing cooperatives, integrated housing management for housing provision and urban and rural development, establish a secondary mortgage market, increase mass construction share, and expand the housing capital market Gradual repayment of bank loan installments in the housing sector Obligating the government to address youth housing and also to prepare and implement a service provision document for veterans in providing affordable housing; this does not, however, address housing for war-affected migrants Reference to the method of issuing ownership deeds for properties located in village residential fabrics - No reference to informal settlement housing and lack of a program or law addressing it
17	"Law on Organizing and Supporting Housing Production and Supply" (2008)	- Reference to the terms: deteriorated fabrics and informal settlements, as well as the production of housing for those without housing, attention to rental housing, housing for low-income groups, support for mass housing construction and the development of residential complexes for low-income groups, support for the improvement and supply of housing in deteriorated fabrics and informal settlements (both public and non-public sectors). - The Central Bank is responsible for allocating loans and facilities for the renewal of deteriorated fabrics. - The articulation of the aforementioned issues and keywords signifies recognition of and attention to the problem (a useful and effective step). However, regarding housing-related support, generalities have been presented and further specification is required. Moreover, neither the framework and extent of government support nor the specific mechanism of the Central Bank has been defined.
18	"Executive By-law of the Law on Organizing and Supporting Housing Production and Supply" (2009)	- Delegation of certain authorities from all executive bodies to the service offices of target neighborhoods. - In this law as well, the settlement status of undocumented informal dwellings has not been resolved: although the issue of deeds and their registration has been raised, their mechanism has not been specified.
19	"Law on Supporting the Rehabilitation, Improvement, and Renovation of Deteriorated and Inefficient Urban Fabrics" (2010)	- Lack of attention to informal settlements. - Delegation of part of the authorities of municipalities and the former Ministry of Housing and Urban Development to their affiliated companies and organizations: if such a change does not lead to corruption, duplication, and rent-seeking, it would be a positive step toward transferring the powers of macro-level state institutions to the private sector, local communities, and non-governmental organizations, although these organizations were still introduced as affiliated with higher-level institutions.
20	"General Policies of the System in Urban Development Affairs" (2010)	Although the two terms "marginal settlement" and "marginal fabrics" have been used to prevent their expansion and organize them, no attention has been paid to informal settlements located within the urban area.
21	"Fifth Five-Year Plan for Economic, Social, and Cultural Development of the Islamic Republic of Iran" (2011–2015)	- Use of the terms deteriorated fabrics, unsuitable rural fabrics, abandoned lands, and remaining dilapidated buildings, marginal settlements, and unauthorized constructions outside the boundaries of cities and villages. - Identification of specific areas in need of renovation, incentive policies supporting renovation, the scheduled annual restoration of deteriorated fabrics, allocation of a percentage of housing sector resources and credits (including Mehr Housing, youth housing, and housing for the needy) to these fabrics, prioritization of the rehabilitation of war-affected cities, abandoned lands, and remaining dilapidated buildings. - Reference to the settlement of marginal populations and unauthorized dwellings, both on the urban fringe and within the urban area, and the proposal to create satellite towns for residents of these fabrics: displacing residents of informal settlements outside the city and relocating them to satellite towns (as observed in some housing plans for this group in Sarbandar) constitutes a form of social injustice under the pretext of development and a better life, while infrastructure and facilities in these towns are usually not provided, imposing additional hardship on the residents. - According to this law, the government, in cooperation with the Judiciary, is tasked with enacting deterrent laws and imposing a prohibition on providing basic services to unauthorized constructions outside the boundaries of cities and villages: this represents a limited exercise of authority to prevent the creation and expansion of informal settlements alongside their displacement outside city limits.

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Rest of Table 3.

Row	Law Title (Year of Enactment)	Description (Authors' Critique and Analysis)
22	"National Strategic Document for the Rehabilitation, Improvement, Renovation, and Empowerment of Deteriorated and Inefficient Urban Fabrics" (2014)	- Priority of attention by municipal and Ministry of Housing and Urban Development-affiliated institutions to informal settlements. - The issue of uncontrolled migration and the expansion of informal settlements has been addressed; however, the development of related plans has been delegated to the Ministry of Interior. - Attention to forecasting, prevention, and immediate response to existing adverse consequences in informal settlements: nevertheless, the detailed planning for their resolution has been delegated to the institutions of the Social Council, whereas economic empowerment of residents would have been a more appropriate and effective solution, as addressing their economic problems would more fundamentally and effectively resolve their social issues. Although the Plan and Budget Organization, the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development, and banks have been tasked with prioritizing informal settlements and inefficient fabrics, the authority for detailed planning rests with a social rather than an economic institution. - Delegation of the management of land ownership and unauthorized occupations in deteriorated fabrics and informal settlements to institutions such as the Foundation of the Oppressed and others: this is one of the effective measures regarding informal settlements and land ownership.
23	"National Strategic Document for the Rehabilitation, Improvement, Renovation, and Empowerment of Deteriorated and Inefficient Urban Fabrics" (2016)	- Addition of an annex in which the National Headquarters and municipalities are tasked with raising the per capita standards of the target deteriorated area (including informal settlements) to the city's average indicators over ten years: this is despite only one year remaining from the law's deadline, while the condition of informal settlements has even worsened.
24	"Sixth Five-Year Plan for Economic, Social, and Cultural Development of the Islamic Republic of Iran" (2017–2021)	- Use of the terms: rural settlements, special areas in need of improvement and renovation, deteriorated and unsuitable rural fabrics, deteriorated fabrics, abandoned lands and dilapidated buildings, marginal areas, and unauthorized settlements. - Attention to: identifying informal areas and concentrating social support and quality-of-life improvements for their residents by promoting reverse migration through job creation and suitable settlements in villages, and planning for the proportional distribution of activities, population, and migration to prevent the increase of marginalization; annual rehabilitation, improvement, renovation, strengthening, and regeneration of at least 270 neighborhoods (including historically inefficient informal and marginal settlements); provision of financial resources, low-cost facilities, and land for housing low-income groups (with priority for cities with fewer than 100,000 inhabitants) through the Housing Foundation; identification of special areas in need of improvement and renovation within deteriorated fabrics with the mentioned priorities; implementation of incentive policies to support the rehabilitation of deteriorated fabrics; rehabilitation of ten percent of deteriorated fabrics; housing for marginal populations and unauthorized settlements, including unauthorized settlements within urban boundaries; rehabilitation of cities affected by the imposed war; and utilization of abandoned lands and remaining dilapidated buildings. - The main feature of this law: creation of satellite towns to house residents of unauthorized settlements, effectively directing a portion of the population outside the city under the promise of development (social injustice).
25	"Executive By-law of the National Sustainable Urban Regeneration Program" (2018)	All ministries, institutions, and state-owned companies whose shares are 100% government-owned are obligated to transfer their lands located in areas with deteriorated fabrics to the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development free of charge to expedite renovation, while the government can assist if it has the capacity for renovation; informal settlements are not included in this measure.
26	"Law on the National Budget" (2022)	- Use of the terms poverty alleviation, informal settlements, deteriorated fabrics, and urban fringe, and allocation of resources from Article 39 of the Value Added Tax Law solely for the improvement and organization of informal settlements. - Lands under the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development must be transferred to residents of informal settlements established before 2015 (1394), as well as twenty percent of the lands owned by the National Land and Housing Organization: if implemented, the issue should have been resolved by now.
27	"Report on the 'Evaluation of the Performance of the Facilitation and Local Development Offices of the Ministry of Interior in Organizing Marginal Neighborhoods" (2022)	- Conducted by the Social Studies Office of the Research Center of the Parliament to evaluate the performance of the Sixth Development Plan on social issues. - Report finding: "Attention to requirements regarding the redefinition of indicators for identifying informal settlements, integrated and coordinated urban management, special focus on governance, and the necessity of a spatial perspective in the process of improving marginalization in the country is unavoidable" (Parliament Research Center, 2023, a). - The problem of informal settlements is not merely a social issue, and it was necessary for other sectors, such as the economy, infrastructure, and parliament's civil and urban development departments, to participate in preparing the report. Nevertheless, the report's outcome represents a positive step in understanding one of the fundamental problems, namely the redefinition of the issue.

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Rest of Table 3.

Row	Law Title (Year of Enactment)	Description (Authors' Critique and Analysis)
28	"Law on the National Budget" (2023)	- The law prioritizes the organization and empowerment of informal settlements (especially around the shrines of Imam Reza (AS), Hazrat Masoumeh (SA), Hazrat Abdolazim Hassani (AS), and Hazrat Ahmad ibn Musa (AS)) in domestic financing through Islamic financial bonds of the Urban Regeneration Company. - A 40% discount on the appraised price of units in deteriorated fabrics as an incentive for renovation, and allocation of lands and properties under the National Land and Housing Organization within city peripheries: allocating land on the urban fringe despite the presence of vacant lands in central areas with existing infrastructure is a conceptual flaw in this law's approach.
29	"Review of Policies and Laws on the Organization of Informal Settlements in Iran and Presentation of a Draft Legislative Revision for the Empowerment and Organization of Informal Settlements" (2023)	- A study conducted to draft the latest national document for the empowerment of informal settlements in the same year (as the most recent major research-based initiative) by the Research Center of the Islamic Parliament: the result was the 2023 National Empowerment Document (see item 30 in the table). - Objective: to review and identify flaws in laws leading to informal settlements. - The most fundamental governance challenges with informal settlements, according to the Parliament Research Center (2023), include: policy confusion, lack of organizational coherence and dispersion of financial resources, budgets, and subsidies inconsistent with costs, unproductive economy, absence of a spatial perspective, concentration of government capital in large cities and land and housing speculation, insufficient understanding of the existing conditions and the issue, flawed planning and organization, absence of a unified program specifically for informal settlements (national and regional), lack of necessary executive guarantees for implementing the empowerment approach and creating conditions for public participation in improvement, and inability to evaluate outcomes all of results in sectoral, scattered, discretionary, and incomplete projects.
30	"Approval Decree of the 'National Empowerment Document for Informal Settlements'" (2023)	- The latest legal version specifically addressing informal settlements. - Despite addressing issues in previous laws, it still has weaknesses. One flaw: the proposal to strengthen villages to encourage reverse migration from informal settlements to rural areas, which results from a misdiagnosis of the problem and its causes, turning into an unrealistic and unfeasible suggestion, as government policies show no signs of rural economic strengthening, decentralization from the capital, or balanced distribution of urban resources in line with social justice. - The main approach emphasized throughout this document focuses on social dimensions more than other issues. This further confirms the insufficient understanding of the problem. While social challenges are indeed prevalent in this type of settlement, the primary cause of their creation and persistence is economic conditions and poverty. Creating employment or providing economic empowerment would be far more effective than empowerment based solely on social crises, which can be highlighted as a critique of this document. The issue of balanced distribution of benefits and resources, and balanced urban development, is so critical that the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, in a 2003 report on the status of informal settlements titled The Challenge of Slums, considered slum settlements to be increasingly prevalent in developed countries and described urban poverty as shifting toward large cities (UN-Habitat, 2020). This is because all benefits are concentrated in central areas, serving as a warning signal for the intensification of informal settlements and migration to these areas connected to major cities.
31	"Law on the National Budget" (2024)	Although this law addresses the financing of supportive housing projects, particularly for young couples and housing for the underprivileged covered by the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, the Welfare Organization, families of martyrs, veterans, and war participants, the organization of informal settlements, deteriorated fabrics, and housing for economically disadvantaged groups has been neglected.
32	"Seventh Development Plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran" (2024–2028)	- Marginalization is treated as a social harm, comparable to corruption and addiction, with regulations and resolutions from the Supreme Council for Spatial Planning aimed at preventing the expansion of marginal settlements through a focus on improving residents' quality of life and delegating the implementation of laws to the Social Affairs Organization. - Attention has been given to deteriorated and inefficient urban fabrics: establishing urban services and public land uses in settlements and population centers on the urban fringe and in deteriorated and inefficient fabrics on vacant lands owned by the government or affiliated organizations, allocation of 40% price benefits (discount) for exchanging units in deteriorated fabrics with newly constructed units, mandating the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development to prepare executive by-laws for the exchange of old housing with new housing, and attention to areas adjacent to deteriorated and inefficient fabrics. However, the definition of deteriorated and inefficient urban fabrics is absent in these laws; the approved boundaries for urban regeneration to allow the exchange of five newly constructed units per deteriorated plot are not clearly specified, and the law permits rather than obligates the government to renovate housing in deteriorated fabrics. - Informal settlements are mentioned within social health discussions, treated solely as a social problem. - There is no attention to rental housing stability and affordability, nor to inclusive residential development. The law's approach to popularizing housing development risks exacerbating the housing shortage for low-income and vulnerable groups, despite the high budget allocated to this sector. Lack of attention to defining affordability and its universal requirements, the rights of the homeless and households at risk of homelessness, housing for newlyweds, families with children, precise criteria and target groups for housing affordability, rental housing, and tenant protection as a vulnerable group, as well as the population crisis and its resolution through housing provision and integrated housing policy, are among the causes of the law's inefficiency. Increased homeownership among wealthier deciles leads to higher housing stock while low-income groups remain in rental or homeless conditions, resulting in greater inequality in national wealth (Farahani, 2023, 3).

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Row	Law Title (Year of Enactment)	Description (Authors' Critique and Analysis)
33	"Law on the National Budget" (2025)	The law addresses the organization of informal settlements, deteriorated and inefficient fabrics, provision of infrastructure, and the delivery of minimum public services such as schools, mosques, libraries, and lighting for these areas, as well as site preparation, landscaping, and implementation of superstructure and infrastructure services for supportive housing projects, and the rehabilitation of historical deteriorated fabrics and informal settlements. It also considers financing supportive housing projects, particularly for young couples and housing for the underprivileged covered by the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, the Welfare Organization, families of martyrs, veterans, and war participants. However, informal settlements within urban boundaries are not addressed. Additionally, the exclusive focus on allocating shares for informal settlements based on population, without considering the variability of resident populations, deprivation levels, and unique characteristics of each settlement compared to others, rather than population comparison, has led to the law's inefficiency (Farnam et al., 2024).

Explanation: Items marked with * indicate milestones within the laws that have had significant impacts on "land," "land ownership," and "informal settlements."

Now that the most important laws on the subject have been reviewed (Table 2) (Table 3) and critiqued (Fig. 2), the next step is to analyze the aforementioned data to examine the levels and positions at which these laws have influenced informal settlements, and to categorize the laws accordingly. The purpose of this classification is to identify the positions where laws have impacted informal settlements. By identifying these positions, future research can focus on solutions for addressing the challenges of informal settlement renewal through legal reform, which is considered the most fundamental and cost-effective factor influencing informal settlements. It should be noted that only the laws that have been discussed and critiqued are presented here, even though many of these laws may have been incompletely, incorrectly, or not implemented at all in practice.

Summary of Research Findings

• Levels of Legal Influence on Informal Settlements

Before presenting the findings, it is necessary to clarify that the primary causes of informal settlements are generally economic poverty and the uneven distribution of benefits, which force individuals to migrate or settle in informal peripheral areas. Macro-level governance, especially in the economic domain, is the main driver. Law is a tool of governance; therefore, reforming laws or enacting effective legislation can be helpful. However, what is referred to in this study as "law in the hands of governance" operates on a smaller scale and includes urban management and the environmental-spatial factors of informal settlements. Based on this assumption and the analysis of laws, they can be classified into three main levels according to their "position of application."

At the first level, some laws lead to the creation of informal settlements. These laws include regulations concerning land ownership, economic weakness caused by uneven distribution of resources and facilities, and the lack of a unified expert plan and urban development strategy. These laws ultimately give rise to colonies of informal settlements, often developing near large or industrial cities that offer better access to resources, facilities, economic conditions, and housing.

The second category of laws causes the continuation and sometimes intensification of the associated problems. In this case, the law encourages more people to settle in these areas or migrate from villages and smaller towns, increasing both the population and the number of existing colonies. With higher population density and inadequate infrastructure to support that population, the challenges in these areas worsen. The lack of proper planning, negligent approaches, and insufficient urban management exacerbate informal settlements.

Finally, some laws are designed and implemented to address the problems of these settlements, which can either resolve the issues or worsen conditions. Laws must solve the problems of inefficient informal areas while also preventing the creation or growth of these settlements. Therefore, laws, programs, and actions intended to mitigate informal settlements can, for various reasons, make the situation worse than before.

The three positions of legal influence on informal settlements (creation, continuation/intensification, and problem-solving) are summarized in a conceptual model (Fig. 3), which distinguishes between laws related to land, land ownership, and informal settlements.

Now that the laws related to land, its ownership, and informal settlements have been analyzed and reviewed, and then classified into three categories based on the positions where they influence the mentioned keywords, the next step is to examine the case study and, with examples from the discussed content, illustrate the impact of laws on Camp B. It is worth noting again that examining and matching the laws with Camp B is somewhat difficult for two reasons: first, the scale of the laws is macro while the scale of Camp B is very micro, making one-to-one correspondence very difficult; and second, the laws are often general directives, and if these macro directives are to be implemented in practice,

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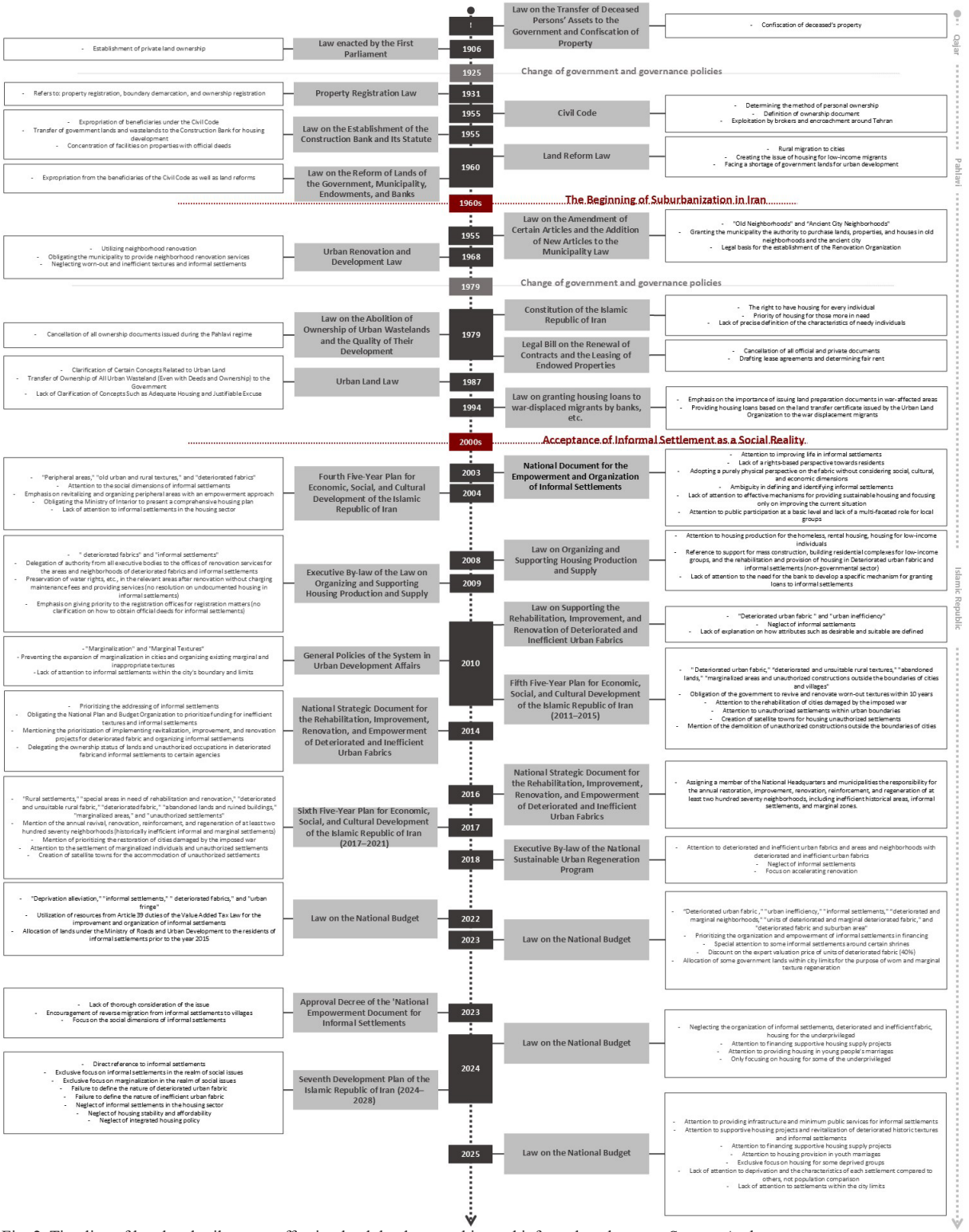


Fig. 2. Timeline of key legal milestones affecting land, land ownership, and informal settlements. Source: Authors.

they must be converted into micro-level policies, programs, plans, and actions at the Camp B level, which addressing it would overlap with the research of other groups. Therefore, for these two reasons, only general examples are mentioned, and the findings, conclusions, objectives, and main concern of the research focus on the impact of macro-level laws on all informal settlements in the country.

• Camp B (Sarbandar): The Poor Neighboring the Wealthy

Camp B was established near the port at the time of the

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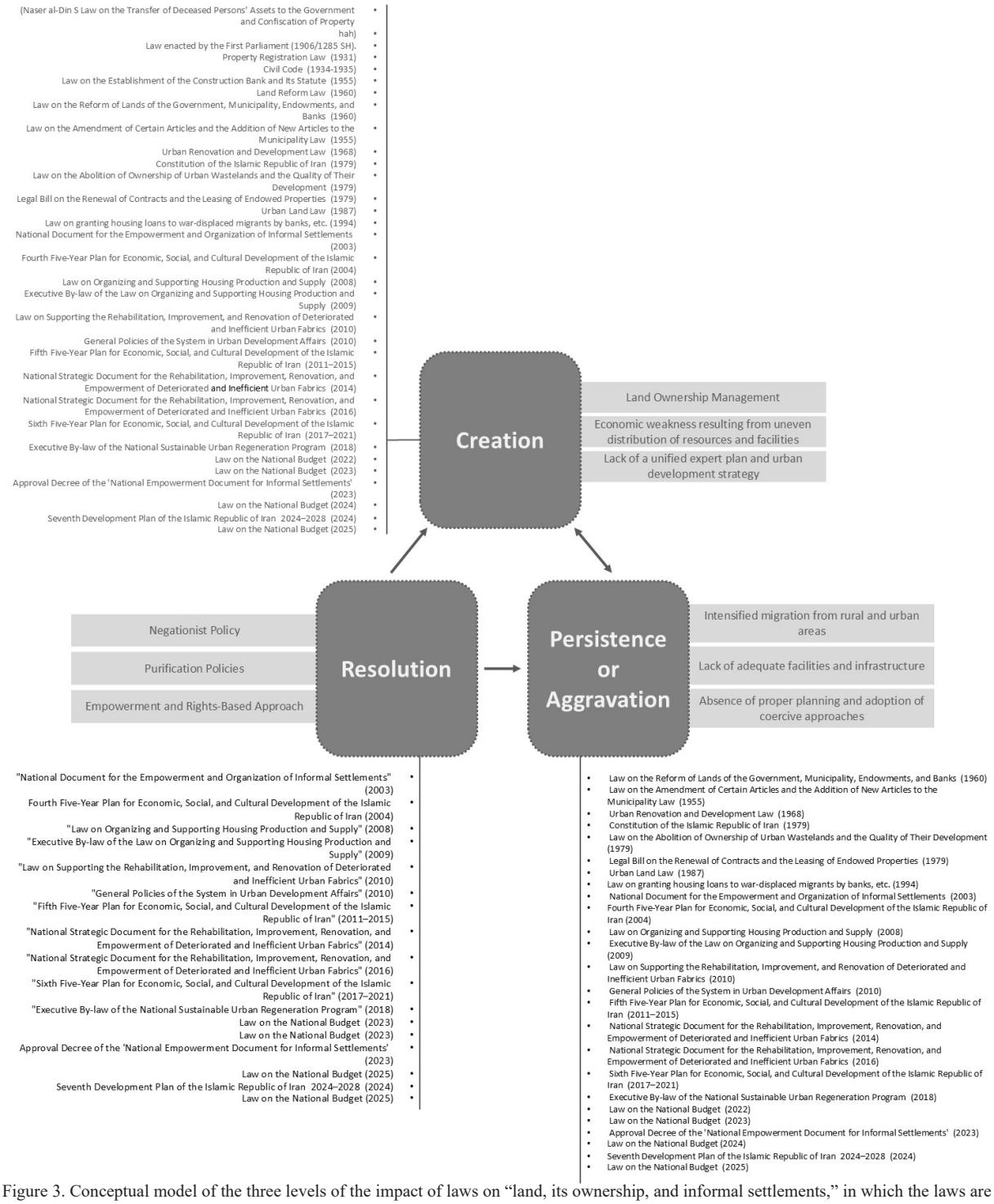


Figure 3. Conceptual model of the three levels of the impact of laws on "land, its ownership, and informal settlements," in which the laws are categorized according to these three positions. Source: Authors.

foundation of one of the largest oil industries and ports in Iran and the Middle East, as a residential area for its workers. Therefore, its construction was intended for worker housing (probably temporary). However, after the Islamic Revolution (1979) and the evacuation by workers, it became vacant and, after the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), was used to temporarily accommodate war-displaced people who had lost their homes, until new houses could be built for them. However, this process did not proceed as planned, and over time, these individuals, without land ownership documents, settled in Camp B. To this day, they and new arrivals remain illegal occupants of part of the city's land, without ownership of the land beneath them. Meanwhile, large port facilities and oil industries nearby generate significant financial flows, yet these residents neither have a share in employment nor

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receive the environmental burdens fairly, and in return, they are not granted their rightful development rights. This issue can be traced to the governance of industries in the context of uneven development.

The absence of a clear program or policy, or the deviation from the original goal of housing war-displaced individuals (goal: temporary accommodation until new homes were constructed), led to the formation of the initial core of informal settlement in Camp B. Therefore, the lack of housing law, delays in constructing new homes, insufficient facilities for war-affected families, and the weak post-war economy can be considered primary causes for the emergence of Camp B as an informal settlement. At this stage, the law could have clarified land ownership for individuals; however, this issue, combined with the weak economy of war-affected households, prevented them from becoming owners of new housing or even the temporary land they inhabited.

On the other hand, the current poor condition of the residents in Camp B increasingly exacerbates the urban problems of this area. After the 2019 flood, which caused extensive damage to southern Iran, including Camp B, attention to solving the informal settlement issue in Camp B intensified. Various organizations, including the municipality, Housing Foundation, Construction Headquarters, and others, implemented and planned different initiatives, such as in-situ housing, allocation of compensatory land to informal settlers, Mehr Housing projects, and Housing Foundation projects, as steps toward addressing the urban informal settlement issue. If these approaches and strategies are considered as enforceable laws, but at a micro and partial scale, these programs have also had positive and negative consequences. While some residents obtained official housing by delivering their informal homes in Camp B and moving to new houses elsewhere or in situ, others not only failed to acquire new, sustainable, and official housing, but also lost all their belongings intended for new construction or renovation, and in some cases lost even the shacks they previously occupied, or continue living in the same previous conditions (Fig. 4).

The laws and programs implemented in Camp B have shortcomings, which have caused the informal settlement problem in this location to persist. One reason for this failure is the lack of an accurate and sufficient understanding of the issue. The facilities, loans, and incentives provided to assist the owners were not aligned with housing construction inflation, the country's macroeconomy, the cost of materials, or construction, and in many cases were not delivered to the owners within the promised timeframe. This caused owners to lose all their assets in the hope of receiving government assistance, leaving them with neither their previous dilapidated housing nor their savings only a half-finished skeleton remains (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Incomplete and insufficient action resulting from a lack of real understanding of the project's future projection due to its time-consuming nature, leading to the infeasibility of renovation. Photographer: Negin Rajab Bojani, 2024.

On the other hand, except for areas where in-situ housing took place and sustainable new houses were built in the same location such as most social housing projects, Mehr Housing, or the National Housing Movement—new houses were constructed outside and far from the city without any urban infrastructure services. This is another issue with new housing, as it reduces residents' willingness to renovate or receive incentives and compensation. These are only part of the inefficiencies in programs and policies in Camp B that have led to the creation, exacerbation, and persistence of informal settlements, all rooted in overall policy and laws.

It should be noted that some measures have empowered residents and led to sustainable and formal housing, which should not be overlooked. However, this research emphasizes impacts at a broader scale. At this level, the influence of laws in the identified positions has been examined across three levels, with the most relevant impacts for Camp B summarized (Table 4).

Therefore, if we want to implement the results of the library research on upstream legal documents and interviews with the local people of Camp B, as well as experts and managers (municipality, Housing Foundation, Imam Ali (AS) Construction Headquarters) in the case study, it can be said that the strategy of local or thematic programs applied in this site has fundamental legal gaps, which have been summarized. This section addresses the policy approach and strategies of housing programs for the residents of the informal settlement of Camp B, as these general strategies are, in a way, mandatory regulations in those actions:

Time-consuming actions and lack of feasibility: Due to insufficient understanding, upstream regulations affecting the Housing Foundation programs (2020) and Mehr Housing (2009 and 2013), the facilities and

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Table 4. Examples of the impact of laws on the informal settlement of Camp B (Sarbinder). Source: Authors.

Row	Sarbandar Case	Law		Explanations	Place of Impact
1	Transformation of Camp B into one of the settlement centers for war-displaced migrants	Absence of specific legislation for organizing the settlement of war-displaced individuals	-	Failure to recognize the residents of Camp B who were displaced by war	Creation/ Intensification
2	Failure to use petrochemical profits to improve the living quality of the city's residents	Distribution of industrial profits to local areas	-	Lack of specification of the amount of profit for local areas	Creation/ Intensification
3	Failure to employ local labor, leading to increased unemployment and poverty, and consequently, alongside the housing crisis, the expansion of informal settlements	Prioritization of employing local labor and qualified local companies (if unavailable, from the nearest county) (Mirjalili & Rajabpour, 2023)	Seventh Development Plan (2024)	Lack of specification of the characteristics of qualified personnel	Creation/ Intensification
4	Rezvān Town as an example of satellite towns for housing allocation to Camp B residents	Establishment of satellite towns for housing residents of informal settlements	Fifth Development Plan (2010)	Social injustice and directing a segment of the population outside the city with the promise of improved conditions, instead of organizing the informal settlement, is an example of corruption and abuse of power in urban land.	Creation/ Intensification/ Resolution

incentives are temporary, not accounting for inflation and capital depreciation during the project implementation. This has resulted in a prolonged implementation process, preventing residents from continuing construction (Mansouri, 2025). Therefore, the feasibility of the plans is questioned. In Camp B, by providing housing outside the city instead of the existing shelters in Camp B, insufficient land, materials, loans, and facilities have led residents, after the expiration of incentives, to be unable to continue, resulting in incomplete and unlivable projects, wasted resources, and loss of even minimal shelter for residents.

Monopolization and commodification of land: Enacting city limit laws to prevent uncontrolled urban expansion and protect natural resources is necessary. However, if this process is accompanied by corruption, it results in land rent and artificial value for land that gains worth solely by being within the legal boundary, not due to livability or adequate infrastructure. This has led to placing construction projects outside the city limits to minimize land costs. Even if this process is considered free from corruption and legitimate, the construction cost in the city center, which has infrastructure and livability, would be lower, but the artificial land value increases prices and prevents allocation of central city land for development, especially for low-income groups. These valuable lands are often released for revenue purposes to specific groups who can afford them.

Lack of executive guarantees and absence of local community participation in city management and development: One of the main ongoing problems in Camp B was the lack of executive guarantees to solve its issues, mainly rooted in conflicting laws, institutional contradictions, and unbalanced power among different sectors, such as the oil industry and the port. This excluded the local community from urban decision-making processes, while officials had neither authority nor enforcement power, which also weakened participation.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the flawed process of legal policymaking at the macro level, the laws from which it originates, and the actions, programs, and policies implemented based on these laws are defective due to: improper locations of law enactment (decisions made in the province or even the capital rather than locally), unqualified decision-makers, lack of public participation in decision-making and implementation, insufficient and remote preliminary studies of laws and actions, and incorrect, unrealistic, non-spatial, and outdated approaches. This flawed cycle continues incorrectly, and thus, the process needs to be corrected from the macro to the micro level.

Conclusion

By examining the laws and regulations enacted by legislative bodies, it can be understood that laws, either directly or indirectly, affect informal settlements or the land and its ownership (as the distinguishing factor of informal settlements from other types of urban housing) in three positions: "creation," "intensification or continuation," and "renovation and organization of these settlements (solution)." In general, these laws either ignore informal settlements (neglectful approaches) or, if

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they recognize them, attempt to take steps to solve the problem (active approaches), where the first step in this stage, prior to action and project implementation, is the enactment of efficient and correct laws.

In this context, eight milestones can be highlighted that have had a significant impact on land, ownership, or informal settlements: the beginning of urban marginalization in Iran (1960s), the legal basis for the establishment of the Urban Renewal Organization (1966), the annulment of land ownerships granted under the Pahlavi regime after the Islamic Revolution (1990s), placing the issue of land ownership on the agenda (2000s), recognition of marginalization and informal settlements as a social reality (2000s–2010s), the first national document for empowerment and organization of informal settlements (2003), research on laws affecting informal settlements (2023), and the latest document on empowerment of informal settlements (2023).

The causes of the creation and growth of informal settlements in Iran can be summarized as follows:

- Growth of migrant populations and lack of decentralization from the capital or industrial metropolises, uneven distribution of resources nationwide, and unbalanced urban development.
- Macroeconomic problems and increasing poverty rates, alongside government inefficiency in housing production.
- Insufficient enforcement guarantees for laws and programs, combined with unsupported promises to the people, leading to a lack of trust in urban management.
- Absence of independent laws for informal settlements (subsumed under deteriorated urban fabric, despite having a different nature).
- Lack of attention to residents' affordability, resulting in unrealistic program planning.
- Enactment of conflicting laws or the division of responsibilities among multiple agencies and institutions, which complicates and prolongs bureaucracy while allowing institutions to evade responsibility by shifting blame onto others.
- Discontinuity of programs with government changes, reducing the speed, or canceling beneficial projects, and losing the opportunity for timely intervention. This indicates non-expert opinions, managerial arbitrariness, and a lack of an integrated long-term strategy for national management. Therefore, laws and programs must be supra-governmental.

Finally, as recommendations derived from the problem analysis of the impact of laws on informal settlements, by analyzing and reviewing laws and then observing their effects in reality, the gaps, flaws, and deficiencies in macro-level laws on informal settlements can be identified and corrected to resolve part of the settlement problems. The authors believe that, if not the most important, at least the majority of informal settlement issues have a direct or indirect legal origin and can be addressed through law reform. Legal reform also facilitates resident participation and increases their willingness to renovate, relieving the government of a burden it cannot handle. Therefore, it appears that laws, in their general sense as guides for policies, programs, plans, and actions at the micro-level, instead of facilitating informal settlement renovation, have become obstacles or inhibitors to this process, and correcting them would reopen the path for renovation. (Here, "policy" refers to downstream micro-policies derived from laws that shape programs, actions, and plans, not the macro-level national strategies that regulate laws.) These legal flaws include (Fig. 5):

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there was no conflict for them in conducting this research.

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HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE
Sartipi Isfahani, M., & Rajab Bojani, N. (2025). Evaluation of Law as a Governance Tool in Informal Settlements (Case study: B-Camp Sarbandar – Bandar Imam Khomeini). *Journal of Revitalization School, 3*(6), 36-57.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.22034/3.6.5
URL: https://jors-sj.com/article-1-76-en.html

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[DOI: DOI: 10.22034/3.6.5]