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## Iran's two-wheeled revolution gets off to wobbly start

Tehran hopes that promoting cycling will help reduce pollution, congestion and obesity

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On Tuesdays in Tehran, pelotons of cyclists in high-visibility vests can be seen taking over the streets of the Iranian capital, many riding the bright orange bikes of a local rideshare app.

Car-free Tuesdays have proved so popular that dozens of municipalities across Iran have now copied the initiative, attracting a range of supporters from uniformed officials and clerics to chador-wearing housewives and businessmen in shirtsleeves, all keen to improve their health and contribute to reducing traffic.

A quiet bicycling boom is underway on the streets of Iran, even as the Islamic republic contends with high-profile [assassinations](#), renewed international concern over its [nuclear programme](#), and an economy collapsing under the pressure of [US sanctions](#).

Like many governments worldwide, Tehran is hoping that promoting cycling could provide a partial answer to perennial problems of pollution, congestion and obesity linked to modern sedentary lifestyles.

“Nowadays in many cities of Iran, cycling development is the goal of many key persons like mayors and deputy mayors,” said Mehdi Hassanzadeh, a transportation engineer who worked on Tehran’s cycle master-plan, which was approved two years ago and envisages hundreds of miles of dedicated cycleways for the Iranian capital.

In the megacity of some eight million people, an estimated 4,000 to 5,000 deaths annually are linked to air pollution, according to the ministry of health, while countless hours are lost in traffic jams.

“Heavy traffic in Tehran has reached a dangerous point,” said Kamal Khoshrou, who heads a local NGO promoting cycling in Iran. “We decided to raise awareness with authorities about how cycling could help in combating the air pollution and the rising number of deaths as its consequence.”

Authorities responded positively, developing plans and allocating budgets. Miles of standardised painted cycleways are already making their way through many of the country’s notoriously congested cities.

Increasing numbers of citizens are also enthusiastically adopting cycling, whether to commute or get some extra exercise.

“Some people are trying to change their lifestyle, or to reduce their transportation costs, as cycling is cheaper than using their own cars,” said a 39-year-old amateur cyclist in Qom, who asked to remain nameless in order to speak freely with a Western journalist.

The religiously conservative city has about 10 miles of cycleways already completed, with another 20 paths in the planning stage, says the man, who took up cycling seriously about five years ago in order to lose some weight.

But encouraging cycling in Iran has not without its challenges, with one of the greatest threats, cyclists say, coming from an unexpected two-wheeled rival.

“When the municipality opens a road for cycling then motorcyclists start using them,” said the man in Qom, in a complaint repeated by cyclists across Iran. “There are more motorcyclists than cyclists and some of them are not friendly.”

“Unfortunately in the current situation police officers don’t enforce” laws against motorcyclists using cycle paths, said Mr Hassanzadeh.

And not everyone is convinced of the merits of cycling.

“Unfortunately in some cases -- not all cases -- we have some challenges with women cycling,” said Mr Hassanzadeh, referring to some religious conservatives who think it is an inappropriate activity for females.

“But women are 50 percent of the population and they need to move in our cities. We are working on this aspect,” said Mr Hassanzadeh.

US sanctions on Iran have also hampered efforts to promote cycling in Iran, Mr Hassanzadeh said, halting partnership efforts with the Netherlands and the World Bank.

Meanwhile though, efforts to promote cycling are continuing at a gentle pace.

"We are not saying this is the solution, but it's a short-term, accessible, cheap and productive" policy to help "ease traffic and pollution a bit," Tehran mayor Pirouz Hanachi told AFP last month. "It won't be like Amsterdam, but it can be a new experience."

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