

Empire, Oil, and Revolution: Political Transformation in Iran From the Pahlavi Monarchy to the Post-Khamenei Transition

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Abstract—Iran has undergone profound political transformation over the past century, evolving from the Pahlavi monarchy to the Islamic Republic while emerging as a major geopolitical actor in the Middle East. This study examines the historical evolution of Iran's political system from the late Pahlavi period to the contemporary post-Khamenei transition, focusing on the interaction between historical legacies, oil politics, revolutionary ideology, and regional security dynamics. The study adopts a qualitative historical research design based on secondary sources, employing a historical-analytical approach supported by Realism, Rentier State Theory, and Regional Security Complex Theory to interpret continuity and change in Iran's political development.

The findings reveal that Iran's political transformation cannot be explained by a single historical event but is the outcome of the combined effects of modernisation, foreign intervention, resource politics, and ideological change. The 1953 coup against Mohammad Mossadegh, the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and the institutionalisation of Velayat-e-Faqih fundamentally reshaped the country's political structure and state legitimacy. The study further demonstrates that Iran's regional strategy reflects a combination of ideological commitment and pragmatic security considerations, evident in its regional rivalries, nuclear policy, and expanding geopolitical influence. It also identifies the post-Khamenei leadership transition as a critical phase that may influence Iran's future domestic governance and regional role. By integrating historical analysis with international relations theory, the study offers a comprehensive framework for understanding Iran's political evolution and contributes to broader debates on revolutionary states, resource politics, and regional security in the Middle East.

Index Terms—Iran, Pahlavi Monarchy, Islamic Revolution, Post-Khamenei Transition, Oil Politics, Rentier State Theory, Middle East, Regional Security

I. Introduction

Iran has played an important role in the history and politics of the Middle East. Its long civilisational past and strategic location make it a key regional power. For centuries, Iran has experienced major political changes. These changes have shaped both its domestic politics and its relations with other countries. Modern Iranian politics began to change during the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. The Shah tried to modernise the country through economic and social reforms. These reforms were called the *White Revolution*. They expanded education, introduced land reforms, and gave voting rights to women. However, these reforms also created new tensions in Iranian society. Many people believed that the reforms ignored religious values and increased social inequality.

Political opposition to the Shah grew stronger during the 1960s and 1970s. Religious leaders, students, workers, and intellectuals began to criticise the monarchy. The Shah's government also relied on strict

political control and surveillance through the secret police. These actions reduced political freedom and increased public anger. By the late 1970s, protests had spread across many cities in Iran. The crisis finally led to the 1979 Iranian Revolution. This revolution was led by the religious scholar Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The revolution ended the Pahlavi monarchy and established the Islamic Republic of Iran. The new political system combined democratic institutions with strong religious authority. At the centre of the system was the Supreme Leader, who held the highest political and religious power in the country.

After the death of Khomeini in 1989, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei became the Supreme Leader. His leadership lasted for more than three decades. During this period, Iran strengthened its political institutions and expanded its regional influence. Iran also developed strong relationships with several political and military groups in the Middle East. These alliances increased Iran's influence in regional conflicts. At the same time, Iran's foreign policy created tensions with several regional powers. Rivalries with Israel and Saudi Arabia became important factors in Middle Eastern politics. These rivalries were connected to ideological differences, security concerns, and regional competition.

Another major source of international tension has been Iran's nuclear program. Iranian leaders have stated that the program is intended for peaceful energy production. However, many Western governments believe that Iran may develop nuclear weapons capability. This issue has led to sanctions, diplomatic negotiations, and international debate about nuclear security in the Middle East. Historical events have also shaped Iran's political attitudes toward foreign powers. One important example is the 1953 coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. Mossadegh had nationalised Iran's oil industry to reduce foreign control. However, his government was removed through a coup supported by the States and the United Kingdom. Many Iranians see this event as a symbol of foreign interference in their country's politics.

Recent developments have created a new stage in Iran's political history. The death of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in 2026 has raised questions about the future direction of the Islamic Republic. The process of selecting a new Supreme Leader may influence Iran's domestic politics and its role in regional geopolitics.

This article examines the historical roots of political transformation in Iran from the late Pahlavi period to the present leadership transition. The study examines four major dimensions of Iran's political transformation: historical state formation, oil politics and foreign intervention, regional security dynamics, and the emerging post-Khamenei leadership transition. Building on the identified research gap, the article addresses four principal research questions. These questions examine the historical factors that shaped Iran's political transformation, the role of oil politics and foreign intervention in state formation, the influence of revolutionary ideology on political institutions, the impact of regional rivalries and the nuclear programme on Iran's strategic behaviour, and the implications of the post-Khamenei leadership transition for the country's future domestic governance and geopolitical orientation. To answer these questions, the study uses qualitative historical analysis and insights from international relations theory. The article combines historical evidence with theoretical perspectives such as realism, rentier state theory, and regional security analysis. Through this approach, the study aims to explain the long-term forces that shaped Iran's political evolution and its role in Middle Eastern geopolitics. While many studies examine individual aspects of Iranian politics, fewer studies connect historical state formation, oil

geopolitics, revolutionary ideology, and contemporary regional security dynamics within a single analytical framework. The article contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it provides a long-term historical analysis linking the Pahlavi monarchy, the Islamic Revolution, and the contemporary leadership transition. Second, it integrates oil politics, revolutionary ideology, and regional security competition within a single analytical framework. Third, it examines how the leadership transition following the death of Khamenei may influence Iran's regional geopolitical strategy.

Table 1. Major Phases of Iran's Political Transformation

Period	Major Event	Political Significance
1941–1951	Consolidation of Pahlavi rule	Centralisation of monarchical authority and modern state-building
1951–1953	Mossadegh's oil nationalisation	Assertion of economic sovereignty and nationalist mobilisation
1953	CIA–UK backed coup	Restoration of the Shah and long-term distrust of foreign intervention
1963–1978	White Revolution	Modernisation accompanied by social inequality and political repression
1979	Islamic Revolution	Establishment of the Islamic Republic and end of monarchy
1980–1988	Iran-Iraq War	Consolidation of revolutionary institutions and national security doctrine
1989–2026	Khamenei era	Institutional consolidation and regional expansion
Post-2026	Leadership transition	Potential recalibration of domestic and regional politics

II. Literature Review and Research Gap

Iran's political transformation has attracted sustained scholarly attention across political science, international relations, and Middle Eastern studies. Foundational studies by Abrahamian (2008), Keddie (2006), and Axworthy (2013) explain the historical roots of the Islamic Revolution by highlighting the interaction of authoritarian modernisation, political repression, religious mobilisation, and foreign intervention. Abrahamian argues that the 1979 Revolution emerged from the combined effects of socio-economic inequality and opposition to foreign influence, while Keddie emphasises the organisational role of Shiite religious institutions in mobilising resistance against the Pahlavi monarchy. Axworthy further demonstrates how the doctrine of Velayat-e-Faqih institutionalised clerical authority within the framework of the Islamic Republic. Subsequent studies by Ehteshami and Zweiri (2007), Takeyh (2009), and Luciani (2017) examine the consolidation of Iran's political institutions, the influence of revolutionary ideology, and the impact of oil wealth on state formation and governance. These studies continue to provide the theoretical foundation for understanding Iran's domestic political evolution.

Recent scholarship has increasingly shifted attention from the historical origins of the Islamic Republic to questions of institutional resilience, regional strategy, and leadership succession. Vakil (2023) argues that Iran's contemporary foreign policy reflects a combination of strategic adaptation, regional power

competition, and efforts to strengthen partnerships with emerging powers in response to changing geopolitical conditions. Abbasi (2025) examines the Islamic Republic's domestic political challenges and contends that institutional resilience, rather than regime transformation, has enabled the political system to adapt to economic pressures and governance challenges while preserving political stability. Glombitza (2026) demonstrates that continuity remains a defining feature of Iran's regional strategy, particularly in relation to the Palestinian issue, despite changing regional political environments and evolving geopolitical alignments. Similarly, Holliday and Wastnidge (2026) argue that Iran's engagement with regional and international orders reflects a pragmatic balance between revolutionary ideology and strategic state interests, indicating that ideological commitments increasingly operate alongside geopolitical calculations rather than replacing them. Jin and Koo (2026) further examine the growing relationship between the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Iranian state, arguing that mutual resource dependence has strengthened institutional cohesion and enhanced the state's capacity to respond to domestic and external pressures.

Although these recent studies significantly advance understanding of Iran's domestic governance, regional strategy, institutional resilience, and leadership transition, they generally examine these issues as separate dimensions of Iranian politics. Comparatively little research integrates historical state formation, oil politics, foreign intervention, revolutionary ideology, regional security competition, and the emerging post-Khamenei transition within a single analytical framework. This study addresses that gap by combining historical analysis with the complementary perspectives of Realism, Rentier State Theory, and Regional Security Complex Theory to explain how these interacting forces have collectively shaped Iran's political evolution from the late Pahlavi monarchy to the contemporary leadership transition. By integrating historical, institutional, economic, and geopolitical perspectives, the study provides a more comprehensive explanation of continuity and change in Iran's political development and contributes to broader debates on revolutionary states, resource politics, and regional security in the Middle East.

Although the existing literature provides valuable insights into Iran's revolution, political institutions, oil politics, nuclear programme, and regional security, most studies examine these issues independently rather than as interconnected dimensions of long-term political transformation. Earlier scholarship largely focuses on the Islamic Revolution or Iran's foreign policy during Khamenei's leadership, while recent studies primarily analyse succession, regional security, or institutional resilience in response to contemporary geopolitical developments. Consequently, there remains limited research integrating historical state formation, resource politics, revolutionary ideology, regional security competition, and the emerging post-Khamenei political transition within a single analytical framework. This study addresses that gap by combining historical analysis with the perspectives of Realism, Rentier State Theory, and Regional Security Complex Theory to explain how these interacting forces have shaped Iran's political evolution from the late Pahlavi period to the contemporary leadership transition. In doing so, it offers a comprehensive interpretation of the historical continuity and strategic adaptation that continue to define Iran's domestic politics and regional geopolitical role.

III. Objectives

This study aims to examine the historical and political transformation of Iran from the late Pahlavi monarchy to the contemporary post-Khamenei transition. It seeks to explain how historical legacies, oil politics, foreign intervention, revolutionary ideology, and regional security competition have collectively shaped the evolution of the Iranian state and its position in Middle Eastern geopolitics. The study also explores the relationship between domestic political institutions and external strategic behaviour to provide a comprehensive understanding of Iran's political development.

The study further analyses the impact of oil politics, foreign intervention, and the 1979 Islamic Revolution on the formation and consolidation of the Islamic Republic. It examines how regional rivalries, particularly with Saudi Arabia and Israel, together with the nuclear programme, have influenced Iran's foreign policy and security strategy. Finally, the study assesses the implications of the post-Khamenei leadership transition for Iran's domestic governance, regional influence, and future geopolitical orientation. By integrating insights from Realism, Rentier State Theory, and Regional Security Complex Theory, the study aims to present a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding continuity and change in Iran's political evolution.

IV. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical research design to examine Iran's political transformation from the late Pahlavi monarchy to the contemporary post-Khamenei transition. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to explain long-term political change, institutional evolution, ideological transformation, and geopolitical developments rather than establish statistical relationships. The research relies primarily on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, policy reports, official government documents, and publications from international organisations. Source selection followed three criteria: academic credibility, relevance to the research objectives, and contribution to understanding Iran's political evolution, oil politics, revolutionary ideology, regional security, and foreign policy. Publications from internationally recognised academic publishers, indexed journals, and reputable policy institutions were prioritised. Sources that lacked academic credibility, contained unsupported opinion, or were not directly related to the research objectives were excluded from the analysis. This selection strategy ensured that the study was based on reliable and authoritative evidence while maintaining consistency with the research questions.

The study employs a historical-analytical method supported by thematic document analysis. The selected literature was systematically examined and organised into five analytical themes: historical state formation and political legitimacy, oil politics and foreign intervention, revolutionary ideology and institutional development, regional security and geopolitical competition, and leadership transition and future political trajectories. Evidence from different academic and policy sources was compared to identify recurring patterns, causal relationships, and areas of scholarly agreement and disagreement. The analysis was interpreted through the complementary perspectives of Realism, Rentier State Theory, and Regional Security Complex Theory, enabling the study to connect domestic political developments with regional and international strategic dynamics. Analytical triangulation was employed by comparing historical records, scholarly interpretations, and contemporary policy analyses to improve the credibility

of the findings and minimise dependence on any single source or perspective. Rather than generating predictive conclusions, the study develops an interpretative explanation of how historical legacies, resource politics, institutional evolution, and regional security interactions have collectively shaped Iran's contemporary political system and geopolitical role.

Table 2. Theoretical Framework of the Study		
Theory	Core Argument	Application in this Study
Realism	States pursue power and security in an anarchic international system	Explains Iran's regional strategy, security doctrine, and strategic competition
Rentier State Theory	Resource wealth shapes political institutions and governance	Explains the influence of oil revenues on state legitimacy and centralised authority
Regional Security Complex Theory	Regional security is shaped by interactions among neighbouring states	Explains Iran's relations with Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Gulf states

V. Historical Foundations of Iran's Political Transformation

Understanding the historical roots of Iran's political transformation is essential for explaining the emergence of the Islamic Republic and the country's present geopolitical behaviour. Modern Iranian political development cannot be separated from the historical experiences of monarchy, foreign intervention, modernisation, and revolutionary ideology. These historical processes created the conditions that eventually led to the collapse of the Pahlavi monarchy and the establishment of a new political system in 1979. The political transformation of modern Iran began during the rule of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who ruled Iran from 1941 to 1979. The Shah aimed to transform Iran into a modern and powerful state. His government introduced a series of economic and social reforms known as the *White Revolution* in the 1960s. These reforms included land redistribution, expansion of education, industrial development, and the introduction of voting rights for women. The reforms were designed to modernise Iranian society and strengthen the state's authority.

Although these reforms produced economic growth, they also created social tensions. Many traditional groups believed that the reforms weakened religious values and disrupted long-standing social structures. Rapid urbanisation also created economic inequality and unemployment in many parts of the country. These changes produced dissatisfaction among workers, students, and religious leaders. Political repression further intensified public dissatisfaction. The Shah's government limited political opposition and controlled public debate. The security organisation SAVAK monitored political activists and suppressed dissent. As a result, many Iranians felt that the government did not allow meaningful political participation. This political environment contributed to growing opposition movements across the country.

Another important historical factor shaping Iran's political transformation was foreign intervention. Many Iranians believed that foreign powers had excessive influence over the country's economic and political affairs. The 1953 coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh played a major role in

shaping these perceptions. Mossadegh had nationalised Iran's oil industry in 1951 in order to reduce foreign control over national resources. However, his government was removed through a coup supported by the United States and the United Kingdom. The removal of Mossadegh created long-lasting resentment among Iranian nationalists and political activists. Many people viewed the coup as evidence that foreign powers were willing to interfere in Iran's domestic politics to protect their strategic interests. This perception later strengthened revolutionary movements that criticised both the monarchy and Western influence.

During the 1970s, political protests expanded across Iran. Demonstrations took place in universities, mosques, and urban centres. Different social groups joined the opposition movement. Religious scholars, workers, students, and intellectuals all expressed dissatisfaction with the existing political system. These diverse groups eventually formed a broad coalition against the monarchy. The revolutionary movement was led by Ruhollah Khomeini, a prominent Shiite cleric who had been living in exile. Khomeini criticised the Shah for authoritarian rule and close relations with Western governments. He also argued that political authority should be guided by Islamic principles. His ideas gained strong support among many Iranians who believed that the monarchy had lost its legitimacy.

In 1979, widespread protests forced the Shah to leave Iran. The monarchy collapsed, and the Islamic Republic of Iran was established. The new political system introduced the doctrine of Velayat-e-Faqih, which placed ultimate political authority in the hands of a religious jurist. The historical roots of Iran's political transformation therefore lie in the interaction between modernisation, political repression, foreign intervention, and revolutionary ideology. These factors gradually weakened the legitimacy of the Pahlavi monarchy and created the conditions for revolutionary change. Understanding these historical dynamics helps explain how Iran moved from a monarchy to a revolutionary state and why the legacy of these events continues to influence Iranian politics today.

VI. Oil Politics, Foreign Intervention, and Revolutionary State Formation

Oil has played a decisive role in shaping modern Iranian politics. Control over oil resources has influenced Iran's economic development, domestic political debates, and relations with foreign powers. Understanding the connection between oil politics and foreign intervention is therefore essential for explaining Iran's political transformation during the twentieth century. The discovery of oil in Iran in the early twentieth century changed the country's economic and strategic importance. Large oil reserves attracted the attention of foreign governments and multinational companies. One of the most important actors in this process was the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, which obtained extensive rights to extract and export Iranian oil. Although oil production increased Iran's economic potential, many Iranians believed that the profits from oil were not distributed fairly. Foreign companies and external governments benefited greatly, while ordinary citizens saw limited economic improvement.

This situation generated strong nationalist reactions within Iranian society. Many political leaders argued that Iran should have full control over its natural resources. One of the most prominent figures in this movement was Mohammad Mossadegh. Mossadegh became Prime Minister in 1951 and quickly introduced a major policy that changed the course of Iranian politics. He nationalised the oil industry in order to end foreign domination of Iran's most valuable resource. The nationalisation policy received

wide support among Iranian citizens. Many people viewed Mossadegh as a leader who defended national sovereignty and economic independence. However, the policy created serious tensions with Western governments, particularly the United Kingdom, which had major economic interests in Iranian oil. Britain responded with economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure. These measures created financial difficulties for the Iranian government and increased political instability within the country.

The Cold War environment also influenced international reactions to the Iranian situation. Western governments feared that political instability in Iran could create opportunities for communist influence. As a result, the United States and the United Kingdom supported efforts to remove Mossadegh from power. In 1953, a coup d'état overthrew Mossadegh's government and restored the authority of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The coup had long-term consequences for Iranian politics. Although the monarchy regained control, many Iranians believed that their democratic government had been removed through foreign interference. This perception contributed to widespread distrust toward Western powers. For many citizens, the 1953 coup symbolised the vulnerability of Iran's sovereignty in the face of external pressure.

Following the coup, the Shah strengthened his political authority and expanded state control over political institutions. Oil revenues increased during the following decades and became a major source of government income. These revenues allowed the state to invest in infrastructure, industrial development, and military expansion. However, the concentration of oil wealth also strengthened centralised political power. Scholars often explain this pattern through rentier state theory, which argues that governments that depend heavily on resource revenues may rely less on taxation and public participation. When the state receives large income from natural resources, it may face fewer pressures to respond to citizens' political demands. In Iran's case, oil income helped the monarchy maintain strong control over political institutions while limiting the growth of democratic participation.

At the same time, oil politics continued to shape Iran's relations with foreign powers. Energy resources increased the country's strategic importance in global politics. Major powers remained interested in maintaining influence over Iran because of its role in global energy markets. These historical experiences influenced the ideology of the Islamic Revolution that emerged in 1979. Revolutionary leaders often referred to the history of foreign intervention and economic exploitation when criticising the monarchy. They argued that political independence required reducing external influence over Iran's economy and natural resources. Oil politics therefore played a central role in shaping Iran's political identity and state policies. The struggle for control over oil created nationalist movements, influenced foreign intervention, and contributed to the political tensions that eventually led to revolutionary change.

Revolutionary ideology played a central role in shaping Iran's political system after the fall of the Pahlavi monarchy in 1979. The Islamic Revolution did not only replace one government with another. It introduced a new political model that combined religion and state authority. Understanding this ideological transformation is important for explaining the structure and behaviour of the modern Iranian state. The revolutionary movement emerged from widespread dissatisfaction with the rule of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Many Iranians believed that the monarchy had become authoritarian and disconnected from society. Political repression, economic inequality, and perceived foreign influence contributed to public frustration. These conditions created an environment in which revolutionary ideas gained strong

support across different social groups.

The intellectual and religious foundation of the revolution was strongly influenced by Ruhollah Khomeini. Khomeini was a prominent Shiite cleric who criticised the monarchy for corruption, political repression, and close relations with Western powers. While living in exile, he developed a political theory that later became central to the Iranian political system. Khomeini introduced the concept of Velayat-e-Faqih, which can be translated as the guardianship of the Islamic jurist. According to this idea, Islamic scholars have the responsibility to guide political authority in order to ensure that governance follows Islamic principles. Khomeini argued that religious scholars should protect society from injustice and corruption when political leaders fail to do so.

This concept represented a major departure from traditional forms of political authority in the region. In many Muslim societies, religious scholars traditionally provided moral guidance but did not directly control state institutions. Khomeini's theory placed religious leadership at the centre of political power. When the revolution succeeded in 1979, these ideas became the foundation of the new political system. Iran adopted a constitution that created the Islamic Republic of Iran. The constitution established a political structure that combined elected institutions with religious oversight.

The most powerful position in this system became the office of the Supreme Leader. The Supreme Leader holds authority over key state institutions, including the military, judiciary, and major policy decisions. This position ensures that political governance remains consistent with Islamic law and revolutionary principles. At the same time, the system also includes republican institutions. Citizens elect a president, members of parliament, and local representatives. However, several institutions ensure that political decisions follow Islamic principles. For example, the Guardian Council reviews legislation to confirm that laws comply with the constitution and Islamic law.

These institutions created a political system that is different from both Western liberal democracies and traditional monarchies. The Iranian model attempts to combine popular participation with religious authority. Revolutionary ideology also influenced Iran's foreign policy. Leaders of the Islamic Republic argued that the revolution represented resistance against oppression and foreign domination. As a result, the new government promoted ideas of political independence and resistance to external influence.

This ideological orientation shaped Iran's relations with many countries. Iranian leaders often criticised the influence of Western powers in the Middle East. At the same time, they expressed support for movements that opposed foreign intervention and regional inequality. Over time, the Islamic Republic developed institutions that preserved the revolutionary ideology while adapting to changing political conditions. After the death of Khomeini in 1989, leadership passed to Ali Khamenei. During his leadership, the political system maintained the core ideological principles established during the revolution. Scholars argue that the revolutionary ideology of Iran serves two important functions. First, it provides legitimacy for the political system by linking governance to religious authority. Second, it shapes national identity by emphasising independence, resistance, and cultural authenticity.

VII. Regional Security Dynamics and Iran's Strategic Behaviour

Regional rivalries play a major role in shaping Iran's foreign policy and security strategy. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Iran has operated in a complex regional environment

marked by political competition, ideological differences, and strategic conflicts. These rivalries influence Iran's diplomatic relations, military planning, and regional alliances. One important aspect of Iran's regional strategy is its effort to maintain security and influence in a region that contains many geopolitical tensions. The Middle East has long been characterised by power competition among regional states. Iran seeks to protect its national interests while responding to perceived security threats from rival states and external powers.

One of the most significant rivalries is between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This rivalry reflects both political and ideological differences. Iran represents a political system based on Shiite Islamic leadership, while Saudi Arabia promotes a Sunni Islamic political tradition. These differences have contributed to political competition across the Middle East. In addition to religious differences, the rivalry also involves competition for regional influence. Both countries attempt to strengthen their positions through diplomatic alliances and political partnerships. In several regional conflicts, Iran and Saudi Arabia have supported opposing political groups. These actions have increased tensions and contributed to instability in parts of the Middle East.

Another major strategic rivalry involves Iran and Israel. Relations between the two countries have been tense since the Islamic Revolution. Iranian leaders have often criticised Israeli policies in the region, particularly regarding Palestinian territories. At the same time, Israeli leaders view Iran's military capabilities and regional alliances as potential security threats. This rivalry has influenced military and strategic planning in the region. Israel has expressed strong concerns about Iran's missile development and nuclear program. In response, Iran argues that its military capabilities are necessary for national defence and regional deterrence. These competing perspectives have increased security tensions and diplomatic disputes between the two states.

Iran's regional strategy also involves building relationships with political groups and governments across the Middle East. These relationships allow Iran to increase its influence and maintain strategic depth in regional politics. Some analysts describe this strategy as an effort to create a network of alliances that can balance the influence of rival states and external powers. At the same time, Iran's regional activities have drawn criticism from several governments that believe these policies increase regional instability. Critics argue that competition between regional powers can intensify conflicts and prolong political crises in fragile states.

Table 3. Iran's Regional Strategic Environment

Regional Actor	Nature of Relationship	Major Issues
Saudi Arabia	Strategic rivalry	Regional influence, sectarian competition, Gulf security
Israel	Adversarial	Nuclear programme, missile capability, proxy conflicts
United States	Competitive	Sanctions, nuclear negotiations, military presence
Russia	Strategic partnership	Defence cooperation, Syria, energy and diplomacy

China	Comprehensive partnership	Belt and Road Initiative, energy trade, investment
Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)	Competitive and cooperative	Maritime security, regional stability, economic relations

Regional rivalries are also influenced by the presence of global powers in the Middle East. The strategic interests of the United States, Russia, and European countries affect the balance of power in the region. Iran often views foreign military presence as a challenge to regional independence and sovereignty. Scholars often analyse these dynamics through regional security complex theory, which explains how the security concerns of neighbouring states are closely interconnected. According to this perspective, conflicts or political changes in one country can quickly influence the security calculations of surrounding states. Iran's regional policies can therefore be understood as part of a broader security environment in which states seek to protect their interests and influence. Strategic competition, ideological differences, and historical experiences all shape the behaviour of regional actors.

Iran's nuclear program has become one of the most debated issues in contemporary international politics. It plays an important role in shaping Iran's relations with regional states and global powers. The development of nuclear technology has raised concerns about security, deterrence, and nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. Understanding the history and strategic purpose of Iran's nuclear program is therefore essential for explaining its geopolitical significance. Iran's interest in nuclear technology began during the rule of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. In the 1950s, Iran joined the United States' "Atoms for Peace" program, which encouraged the peaceful use of nuclear energy. The Shah's government believed that nuclear technology could help Iran modernise its economy and meet growing energy demands. Several research projects and nuclear facilities were developed during this period with assistance from Western countries. However, the 1979 Islamic Revolution interrupted many of these nuclear projects. The new government initially slowed nuclear development because revolutionary leaders questioned the policies of the former monarchy. Over time, however, Iranian authorities reconsidered the strategic value of nuclear technology. By the 1990s, the government resumed efforts to expand nuclear research and develop domestic nuclear capabilities. Iranian leaders have repeatedly stated that the country's nuclear program is intended for peaceful purposes. According to official statements, the program aims to support energy production, scientific research, and technological development. Iran argues that nuclear energy can help reduce dependence on fossil fuels and support long-term economic planning.

Despite these claims, many governments have expressed concern that Iran could eventually develop nuclear weapons capability. Countries such as Israel have argued that a nuclear-armed Iran could significantly alter the balance of power in the Middle East. Israeli leaders often describe Iran's nuclear program as a major security threat. International concern over the nuclear issue increased in the early 2000s when reports revealed previously undeclared nuclear facilities. These revelations led to negotiations between Iran and several world powers. Diplomatic efforts sought to limit Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for economic incentives and relief from international sanctions.

One important outcome of these negotiations was the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)

agreement in 2015. Under this agreement, Iran accepted limits on uranium enrichment and allowed international inspections of its nuclear facilities. In return, several international sanctions against Iran were lifted. The agreement aimed to reduce tensions and prevent nuclear proliferation in the region. However, the agreement faced political challenges and disagreements among participating countries. Changes in international policy and diplomatic tensions affected the stability of the agreement. As a result, debates about Iran's nuclear program continue to shape international diplomacy and regional security discussions.

Table 4. Evolution of Iran's Nuclear Programme

Period	Major Development	Strategic Significance
1957–1978	Atoms for Peace programme	Introduction of civilian nuclear technology
1979–1989	Temporary slowdown	Post-revolution restructuring
1990s	Revival of nuclear programme	Indigenous technological capability
2003–2015	International negotiations	Nuclear diplomacy and sanctions
2015	JCPOA	Temporary easing of international tensions
2018 onwards	Renewed tensions	Expanded enrichment and regional security concerns
Post-2026	Future trajectory	Leadership transition and strategic uncertainty

Many scholars interpret Iran's nuclear program through the concept of strategic deterrence. According to this perspective, states seek advanced military or technological capabilities to discourage potential attacks from adversaries. Iran's leaders often argue that strong defence capabilities are necessary because the country faces security pressures from rival states and external powers. Regional rivalries also influence the nuclear debate. Iran's competition with Saudi Arabia and strategic tensions with Israel contribute to security concerns in the Middle East. Some analysts argue that the nuclear issue reflects broader regional power struggles rather than only technological development. The nuclear question therefore represents more than a technical issue. It is closely connected to national security, political identity, and regional geopolitics. The issue affects diplomatic relations, economic policies, and international negotiations.

VIII. The Post-Khamenei Transition and the Future of Iranian Politics

Leadership succession is a critical issue in the political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The death of Ali Khamenei in 2026 marks an important turning point in the country's contemporary political history. For more than three decades, Khamenei played a central role in shaping Iran's political institutions, foreign policy orientation, and regional strategy. His absence raises important questions about the future direction of the Iranian state and the stability of its political system. The position of Supreme Leader is the most powerful office in the Iranian political structure. According to the Iranian constitution, the Supreme Leader holds authority over major state institutions, including the armed forces, the judiciary, and key elements of foreign and security policy. This structure was originally designed by Ruhollah Khomeini after the 1979 revolution. Khomeini believed that a senior religious

authority should guide the political system in order to ensure that governance remained consistent with Islamic principles.

After Khomeini's death in 1989, the leadership of the Islamic Republic passed to Khamenei. During his long tenure, Khamenei strengthened the institutional framework of the Islamic Republic. He expanded the authority of the Supreme Leader and reinforced the role of key political institutions such as the Guardian Council and the Revolutionary Guard. These institutions helped maintain political stability and protect the ideological foundations of the revolution. Khamenei's leadership also shaped Iran's regional strategy. Under his guidance, Iran increased its influence in several areas of the Middle East through diplomatic engagement and strategic partnerships. Iranian policymakers often emphasised the importance of regional independence and resistance to foreign intervention. These policies reflected the broader ideological orientation of the Islamic Republic, which emphasises political sovereignty and resistance to external domination.

The death of Khamenei has therefore created a period of political uncertainty. According to the Iranian constitution, the responsibility for selecting a new Supreme Leader belongs to the Assembly of Experts, a body composed of senior clerics elected by the public. The Assembly examines potential candidates and selects the individual who is considered most capable of fulfilling the responsibilities of the position. The leadership transition process is complex because the Supreme Leader must possess both religious authority and political experience. In addition, the individual must maintain the support of key institutions within the Iranian political system. These include the clerical establishment, the political leadership, and security organisations such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Leadership transitions in revolutionary political systems often create important moments of political adjustment. Different political groups may attempt to influence the direction of the transition process. Some factions may support policies that emphasise ideological continuity, while others may advocate reforms that address social and economic challenges. Another important factor in the post-Khamenei period is the relationship between domestic politics and regional strategy. Iran's foreign policy has long been influenced by ideological principles as well as security considerations. Changes in leadership could therefore influence diplomatic priorities, regional alliances, and negotiation strategies in international relations.

The leadership transition may also influence debates about economic policy and domestic governance. Iran faces several economic challenges, including the effects of international sanctions, economic inequality, and the need for long-term development strategies. A new leadership structure may introduce different approaches to managing these issues. At the same time, many analysts believe that Iran's political institutions are designed to maintain continuity during leadership changes. The constitution, the clerical establishment, and the existing political framework provide mechanisms that help prevent sudden political instability.

Table 5. Drivers of Iran's Political Transformation

Driver	Historical Impact	Contemporary Impact
Oil politics	Resource nationalism and state revenue	Energy diplomacy and strategic leverage
Foreign intervention	Nationalist mobilisation and anti-Western sentiment	Strategic autonomy in foreign policy
Revolutionary ideology	Creation of Islamic Republic	Domestic legitimacy and foreign policy orientation
Political institutions	Consolidation of clerical authority	Institutional continuity and governance stability
Regional security	Defence against external threats	Regional influence and strategic alliances

IX. Findings

The analysis identifies four interrelated patterns that explain Iran's political transformation. First, political change in Iran has been cumulative rather than episodic. The transition from the Pahlavi monarchy to the Islamic Republic was not the result of a single revolutionary event but the outcome of sustained interactions among state-led modernisation, political exclusion, resource politics, and external intervention. These factors gradually eroded the legitimacy of the monarchy while creating conditions that enabled a new political order to emerge. The evidence therefore indicates that domestic political transformation in Iran is closely linked to historical experiences and external geopolitical pressures rather than to internal ideological mobilisation alone.

Second, the study demonstrates a clear causal relationship between resource politics and state formation. Control over oil resources not only influenced Iran's economic development but also shaped state legitimacy, foreign policy, and relations with external powers. Foreign intervention in response to resource nationalism strengthened anti-Western political narratives and reinforced demands for political sovereignty. Rather than functioning merely as an economic asset, oil became a strategic instrument that influenced both domestic institutional development and Iran's external behaviour. This finding supports the central proposition of Rentier State Theory, which explains how resource dependence contributes to the concentration of political authority and the evolution of state institutions.

Third, the findings reveal that the Islamic Republic has maintained political continuity by combining ideological legitimacy with institutional adaptation. Revolutionary ideology has remained an important source of political legitimacy, but governance has increasingly reflected pragmatic responses to economic constraints, regional rivalries, and international pressures. The interaction between ideological principles and strategic decision-making demonstrates that Iran's political behaviour cannot be interpreted solely through ideological explanations. Instead, security considerations, institutional resilience, and geopolitical calculations have become equally important in shaping domestic governance and foreign policy. This finding reinforces the explanatory value of Realism, which views state behaviour as driven by security and survival within a competitive international environment.

Table 6. Major Findings of the Study

Research Theme	Principal Finding	Broader Implication
Historical transformation	Political evolution driven by multiple historical forces	Long-term institutional continuity
Oil politics	Resource wealth shaped state formation	Strategic autonomy and economic resilience
Revolutionary ideology	Institutionalised religious legitimacy	Stable political framework
Regional rivalry	Security concerns drive foreign policy	Increased geopolitical influence
Nuclear programme	Strategic deterrence and diplomacy coexist	Continued regional and global attention
Leadership transition	Institutional continuity with potential policy adjustment	Future geopolitical recalibration

Finally, the study finds that Iran's regional strategy reflects the interaction between domestic political institutions and the wider Middle Eastern security environment. Rivalries with Saudi Arabia and Israel, debates over the nuclear programme, and expanding regional partnerships have become integral components of Iran's security strategy rather than isolated foreign policy issues. The emerging post-Khamenei transition represents a further stage in this long-term political evolution. Although the constitutional framework provides mechanisms for institutional continuity, future leadership choices are likely to influence the balance between ideological continuity and strategic adaptation. These findings support Regional Security Complex Theory by demonstrating that Iran's domestic political evolution and regional security environment are mutually reinforcing processes. The study argues that Iran's political transformation is best explained through the interaction of historical legacies, resource politics, institutional resilience, and regional geopolitical competition rather than through any single historical event or ideological factor.

X. Discussion

The findings reinforce the argument advanced by Abrahamian (2008) that Iran's political transformation resulted from the interaction of political repression, socio-economic inequalities, and foreign intervention rather than from religious mobilisation alone. The present study similarly demonstrates that the erosion of the Pahlavi monarchy was a cumulative process driven by authoritarian modernisation, oil politics, and declining political legitimacy. At the same time, the analysis supports Keddie (2006) by confirming that Shiite religious institutions played a central role in transforming public discontent into organised political mobilisation during the Islamic Revolution. However, this study extends both interpretations by showing that revolutionary ideology alone cannot explain Iran's subsequent political trajectory. Instead, institutional resilience, resource politics, and regional security dynamics have been equally important in shaping the evolution of the Islamic Republic. These findings therefore broaden earlier historical explanations by integrating domestic political transformation with long-term geopolitical and economic factors.

The study also aligns with Takeyh (2009), who argues that the Islamic Republic has combined revolutionary ideals with pragmatic foreign policy decisions to preserve state interests. The present analysis similarly finds that Iran's regional strategy reflects a balance between ideological commitments and strategic calculations rather than ideological objectives alone. This conclusion is broadly consistent with Vakil (2023), who argues that contemporary Iranian foreign policy increasingly reflects regional power competition and changing geopolitical realities. However, this study extends Vakil's argument by demonstrating that these strategic choices are rooted in historical experiences of foreign intervention and institutional evolution rather than being solely responses to current regional developments. Likewise, the findings complement Maloney (2026) by recognising the significance of the post-Khamenei leadership transition for Iran's domestic governance and foreign policy. Nevertheless, this study argues that constitutional institutions and established political structures are likely to provide greater continuity than is often emphasised in succession-focused analyses, suggesting that institutional resilience may moderate the effects of leadership change.

The findings also support recent scholarship by Abbasi (2025), which highlights the Islamic Republic's capacity to adapt to internal political and economic pressures while preserving institutional stability. The present study similarly finds that Iran has maintained political continuity by combining ideological legitimacy with institutional adaptation. In addition, the analysis is consistent with Glombitza (2026), who argues that Iran's regional policies exhibit significant continuity despite changing regional conditions. However, this study broadens that perspective by demonstrating that continuity is not driven solely by ideological commitment but also by the interaction of historical memory, oil politics, and regional security considerations. Theoretically, the findings confirm that no single framework adequately explains Iran's political evolution. Realism effectively explains Iran's pursuit of security and regional influence, Rentier State Theory clarifies the relationship between oil revenues and state authority, and Regional Security Complex Theory explains how regional rivalries shape both domestic political choices and foreign policy behaviour.

By integrating these complementary perspectives, the study provides a more comprehensive explanation of Iran's political transformation than approaches that rely on a single theoretical lens.

XI. Conclusion

This study examined the historical and political transformation of Iran from the late Pahlavi monarchy to the contemporary post-Khamenei transition by integrating historical analysis with perspectives from Realism, Rentier State Theory, and Regional Security Complex Theory. The analysis demonstrates that Iran's political evolution cannot be attributed to a single historical event or ideological movement. Rather, it reflects the cumulative interaction of modernisation, foreign intervention, oil politics, revolutionary ideology, and regional security competition over several decades. The decline of the Pahlavi monarchy, the nationalisation of oil, the 1953 coup, and the 1979 Islamic Revolution collectively reshaped Iran's political institutions and redefined the foundations of state legitimacy. The establishment of the Islamic Republic introduced a distinctive political model in which republican institutions operate alongside religious authority, creating a system that has shown considerable institutional continuity despite domestic and external pressures.

The study also demonstrates that Iran's regional behaviour is driven by the interaction of ideological objectives and strategic calculations. Its engagement in regional rivalries, security partnerships, and nuclear diplomacy reflects both historical experiences of external intervention and contemporary concerns regarding national security and regional influence. The emerging post-Khamenei leadership transition represents an important moment in Iran's political development, with potential implications for domestic governance, foreign policy, and the regional balance of power. While the institutional framework of the Islamic Republic is designed to preserve political continuity, future leadership choices will shape the country's response to evolving geopolitical challenges and economic pressures. By integrating historical developments with contemporary regional dynamics, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how historical legacies, resource politics, and security competition continue to influence Iran's political evolution and its strategic role in the Middle East. These findings offer useful insights for scholars and policymakers seeking to understand political continuity, institutional adaptation, and regional order in one of the Middle East's most influential states.

XII. Policy Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for policymakers concerned with regional stability and international security in the Middle East. First, the analysis suggests that Iran's political behaviour should be understood within the broader context of its historical experiences, particularly the legacy of foreign intervention, oil politics, and revolutionary state formation. Diplomatic initiatives that acknowledge these historical factors are more likely to foster constructive engagement than approaches based solely on coercive measures or strategic isolation. Sustainable regional stability will require confidence-building measures, institutional dialogue, and greater diplomatic engagement among Iran, the Gulf states, and major external powers to reduce mutual distrust and prevent the escalation of regional conflicts.

Second, the study highlights the need for a balanced regional security architecture that addresses both conventional and non-conventional security challenges. Iran's regional policies, strategic partnerships, and nuclear programme are closely linked to its perceptions of national security and regional competition. Consequently, international efforts to address the nuclear issue should combine effective verification mechanisms with sustained diplomatic negotiations that also consider broader regional security concerns. At the same time, greater cooperation on maritime security, counter-terrorism, energy security, and conflict resolution could reduce strategic tensions and encourage more stable regional relations. Strengthening multilateral platforms involving regional and extra-regional stakeholders would further support dialogue and crisis management in the Middle East.

Finally, the emerging post-Khamenei leadership transition presents both challenges and opportunities for regional and global policymakers. The transition is likely to influence Iran's domestic political priorities, foreign policy orientation, and engagement with international institutions. Governments and international organisations should therefore closely monitor institutional developments while maintaining diplomatic channels that encourage dialogue rather than confrontation. For countries such as India, which maintain strategic relations with both Iran and the Gulf states, a balanced and pragmatic approach will remain essential for safeguarding energy security, promoting regional connectivity through initiatives such as the

International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and Chabahar Port, and contributing to long-term regional stability. Overall, the study suggests that durable peace in the Middle East will depend not only on addressing immediate security concerns but also on recognising the historical, political, and geopolitical factors that continue to shape Iran's strategic behaviour.

The findings also have important implications for emerging multilateral institutions and regional partnerships. Iran's growing engagement with BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) reflects its broader strategy of reducing dependence on Western-led political and economic structures while strengthening cooperation with emerging powers. These platforms provide opportunities for expanding trade, investment, energy cooperation, financial connectivity, and strategic dialogue, thereby enhancing Iran's economic resilience and regional integration. For BRICS and the SCO, greater engagement with Iran can contribute to strengthening Eurasian connectivity, promoting energy security, and supporting a more balanced multipolar regional order. At the same time, these organisations must encourage constructive regional cooperation, conflict management, and economic integration to ensure that strategic competition does not undermine regional stability.

The study highlights important implications for India–Iran relations. India has longstanding strategic interests in maintaining stable relations with Iran while simultaneously strengthening partnerships with the Gulf states, the United States, and Israel. Continued cooperation through Chabahar Port, the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and energy partnerships remains important for improving regional connectivity and facilitating trade between South Asia, Central Asia, and Europe. At the broader regional level, the findings underscore the need to develop a more inclusive Gulf security architecture based on dialogue, confidence-building measures, maritime security cooperation, and respect for state sovereignty. Such an approach would reduce the risks arising from regional rivalries, encourage peaceful conflict resolution, and create conditions for greater economic cooperation and long-term stability across the Persian Gulf and the wider Middle East.

Table 7. Policy Implications

Stakeholder	Policy Recommendation
Iran	Balance ideological commitments with economic reforms and regional diplomacy
Gulf States	Strengthen confidence-building measures and security dialogue
India	Expand cooperation through Chabahar Port, INSTC, and energy partnerships
US & EU	Pursue sustained diplomatic engagement alongside nuclear verification
IAEA	Enhance technical monitoring and confidence-building mechanisms
United Nations	Promote regional dialogue and conflict prevention initiatives

XIII. Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the existing literature by providing an integrated explanation of Iran's political transformation through the combined application of Realism, Rentier State Theory, and Regional Security Complex Theory. While previous studies have generally examined the Islamic Revolution, oil

politics, regional security, or Iran's foreign policy as separate areas of inquiry, this research demonstrates how these factors interact to shape the evolution of the Iranian state. By linking the decline of the Pahlavi monarchy, the nationalisation of oil, the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the consolidation of the Islamic Republic, and the emerging post-Khamenei transition within a single analytical framework, the study offers a more comprehensive understanding of continuity and change in Iran's political development.

The study also extends theoretical debates on revolutionary states by showing that ideological legitimacy and strategic pragmatism are not mutually exclusive but operate simultaneously in shaping state behaviour. Realism explains Iran's pursuit of security and regional influence, Rentier State Theory illustrates the role of oil wealth in strengthening state institutions and political authority, and Regional Security Complex Theory clarifies how interactions with neighbouring states influence Iran's foreign and security policies. By integrating these complementary perspectives, the study develops a multidimensional framework that connects domestic political evolution with regional geopolitical dynamics. This approach not only advances the theoretical understanding of Iran's political trajectory but also provides a useful analytical model for examining other resource-rich revolutionary states operating in complex regional security environments.

XIV. Limitations of the Study

This study has certain limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the research relies primarily on secondary sources, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and official publications. Although these sources provide substantial academic evidence, the absence of primary archival materials, official government records, and interviews with policymakers limits direct insight into internal political decision-making within the Iranian state. In addition, much of the available literature is published in English, while important Persian-language sources remain inaccessible, which may restrict the inclusion of certain domestic perspectives on Iran's political evolution.

Second, the study examines a broad historical period extending from the late Pahlavi monarchy to the contemporary post-Khamenei transition. Such a long temporal scope requires selective treatment of several historical events and policy developments, preventing an equally detailed examination of every phase of Iran's political history. Furthermore, the post-Khamenei transition represents an evolving political process whose long-term consequences cannot yet be fully assessed. As new leadership arrangements, regional alignments, and foreign policy priorities continue to emerge, some interpretations presented in this study should be regarded as provisional rather than definitive.

Third, the study focuses primarily on political transformation, state institutions, and regional geopolitics. While social movements, cultural change, public opinion, economic restructuring, and domestic governance are considered where relevant, they are not examined in comparable depth. Similarly, the qualitative historical approach adopted in this research emphasises interpretation rather than statistical measurement or causal testing. Future studies could strengthen the analysis by incorporating primary field research, Persian-language archival sources, elite interviews, comparative case studies, or mixed-method approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Iran's evolving political system and its role in the changing regional order.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a comprehensive historical and analytical overview of Iran's political transformation. By connecting historical developments with contemporary geopolitical dynamics, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of Iran's evolving political system and its role in Middle Eastern politics.

XV. Future Scope of Research

This study provides a historical and analytical examination of Iran's political transformation from the Pahlavi monarchy to the contemporary post-Khamenei transition. Future research could build on this analysis by examining how the new leadership structure influences policy continuity, institutional reform, and state–society relations over the coming decade. As the post-Khamenei transition continues to unfold, longitudinal studies using updated empirical evidence will provide deeper insights into the evolving balance between ideological continuity and political adaptation. Comparative studies involving other revolutionary states, such as China, Cuba, or Vietnam, could also help identify common patterns and distinctive features of institutional resilience, leadership succession, and state transformation.

Future studies may also expand the analytical scope by incorporating primary data, including elite interviews, archival materials, and Persian-language sources, to complement the secondary evidence used in this study. Mixed-method research combining qualitative analysis with quantitative indicators of governance, economic performance, public opinion, or regional security could provide a more comprehensive understanding of Iran's political evolution. In addition, further research should examine Iran's expanding role within BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and emerging regional security frameworks to assess how changing geopolitical alignments influence the country's strategic position in an increasingly multipolar international order. Such studies would contribute to a deeper understanding of the interaction between domestic political institutions, regional security dynamics, and global power shifts in contemporary international relations.

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