



The Outbreak of the Iranian Islamic Revolution: A Neoclassical Realism Perspective

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Abstract. The Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 represents a pivotal transformation in both Iran's domestic political order and Middle Eastern geopolitics. Existing explanations often emphasize religious mobilization, socio-economic change, or foreign intervention in isolation. This article advances a neoclassical realist framework to explain the rapid collapse of the Pahlavi monarchy and the swift success of the Islamic Revolution by integrating international systemic pressures with domestic mediating variables. It argues that systemic changes in the 1970s—including the relative decline of U.S. hegemony, the strategic retrenchment embodied in the Nixon Doctrine, the Carter administration's human rights diplomacy, and Soviet expansionism—constituted key external stimuli. However, these pressures shaped outcomes only through domestic filters, particularly deteriorating state–society relations, leaders' perceptions, and Iran's strategic culture rooted in anti-colonialism and Shi'a resistance. Through process tracing and historical analysis, the study demonstrates how the leadership's misperception of both domestic opposition and U.S. commitment, combined with partial liberalization and elite fragmentation, eroded regime legitimacy. In contrast, Ayatollah Khomeini effectively interpreted systemic constraints, mobilized religious networks, and transformed external pressure into revolutionary momentum. This study extends the applicability of neoclassical realism to revolutionary and religious states, offering a cross-level explanation for regime collapse and foreign policy transformation in non-Western contexts.

Keywords: The Iranian Islamic Revolution, Neoclassical Realism, Foreign Policy.

1 Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Problem Statement

The Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 constitutes one of the most consequential events in contemporary international politics. It not only marked the beginning of modern Iranian politics but also fundamentally reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. By establishing the world's first modern theocratic republic under clerical authority, the revolution introduced a novel political system grounded in

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Islamic jurisprudence. Equally significant was Iran's dramatic foreign policy transformation—from a core pillar of the U.S.-led Cold War order to a revolutionary state openly opposing American hegemony.

Neither the revolution nor Iran's radical policy shift was accidental. Both emerged from the interaction between structural pressures in the international system and domestic political dynamics within Iran. This article employs neoclassical realism to address two central questions: why did the Pahlavi monarchy collapse with such speed, and why did the Islamic Revolution erupt so rapidly?

To answer these questions, this study constructs a neoclassical realist analytical framework that integrates international systemic pressures with domestic intervening variables. By doing so, it provides a multi-layered explanation of the revolutionary outbreak and offers broader insights into the behavior of revolutionary states and the strategic calculations of major powers.

1.2 Literature Review and Problem Statement

The Iranian Islamic Revolution propelled Iran into the focus of global scholarly attention, becoming a central topic of concern in both political and academic circles. Since the outbreak of the revolution, extensive research has been conducted by scholars worldwide. Existing studies have explained the causes of the revolution from perspectives such as religious mobilization, nationalist awakening, and foreign intervention.

Said Amir Arjomand emphasizes the role of religion, arguing that “concepts of justice and messianic hope hold particular significance in Iran,” and that religious networks were fully preserved in modern Iran, allowing “the explosive power of religion to destroy everything in its path [15].” Nikki R. Keddie approaches the issue from a nationalist perspective, contending that severe U.S. intervention in Iran after World War II activated deep-seated sensitivities rooted in the colonial era, motivating Iranians to seek liberation from foreign control through revolution and to establish an independent economic, social, and cultural order [11]. Ha Quan'an analyzes the revolution through the lens of the White Revolution, arguing that it fundamentally altered Iran's socio-economic structure and power balance, undermining the material foundations of the Pahlavi dynasty and ultimately leading to its collapse [8]. Another Chinese scholar, Mu Hongyan, adopts a power structure and balance perspective, arguing that the “August Coup” led to a complete rupture between the intellectual elite and the royalist camp, rendering the monarchy incapable of counterbalancing the increasingly powerful clerical establishment and thereby triggering the Islamic Revolution [14].

However, most existing studies focus predominantly on Iran's domestic dynamics or examine only a limited number of external actors, primarily the United States. The outbreak of the Islamic Revolution, however, cannot be attributed to a single factor; rather, it was the result of the combined effects of international and domestic forces.

Neoclassical realism emerged around the turn of the 21st century. In his seminal 1998 article *Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy*, Gideon Rose outlined the core propositions of neoclassical realism, arguing that the international

system is the most important variable influencing foreign policy, while also proposing a preliminary model in which domestic factors interact with systemic pressures to shape foreign policy outcomes [16]. Neoclassical realism acknowledges the importance of systemic stimuli but emphasizes that these pressures are mediated and filtered through domestic political environments [1]. Unlike Kenneth Waltz's structural realism, which treats the distribution of relative power as the sole explanatory variable, neoclassical realism highlights structural modifiers—domestic constraints that shape and adjust foreign policy responses. As the theory evolved, scholars proposed a third category of neoclassical realist foreign policy models, identifying four key domestic intervening variables: leaders' perceptions, strategic culture, state–society relations, and domestic institutional arrangements [10]. This theoretical development provides a solid foundation for applying neoclassical realism to the analysis of Iran's foreign policy and revolutionary transformation.

With its application across diverse national and regional contexts, neoclassical realism has continued to develop. For example, Huang Yunsong and others analyze India's hedging strategy toward China from a neoclassical realist perspective, revealing the interaction between international systemic variables and leaders' perceptions through cross-level analysis [9]. Dr. Zhu Yining, within a neoclassical realist framework, examines South Korea's policy shifts by integrating factors such as systemic transformation driven by Sino–U.S. competition, the North Korean nuclear issue, domestic party politics, and strategic culture [17]. Li Yibin applies neoclassical realism to explain India's counterterrorism policies under the Modi government, arguing that policy instrumentalization reflects the dual pursuit of domestic resource integration and enhanced international status [13].

To date, no study has systematically applied a neoclassical realist framework to the Iranian context. The innovation of this article lies in introducing a cross-level neoclassical realist model that integrates international systemic pressures with domestic political variables, offering a more comprehensive explanation of the outbreak of the Iranian Islamic Revolution. At the theoretical level, this study expands the applicability of neoclassical realism and enriches the conceptualization of domestic intervening variables.

2 Theoretical Framework: A Neoclassical Realist Explanation

2.1 Core Propositions

Neoclassical realism seeks to bridge the divide between structural realism and unit-level theories. It holds that international systemic structures—such as shifts in hegemonic power—constitute the primary independent variables shaping state behavior. However, these pressures do not translate directly into policy outcomes. Instead, they are filtered through domestic intervening variables that shape how leaders perceive and respond to external constraints.

Accordingly, this study proposes the following explanatory model: changes in the international system during the 1970s—particularly U.S. strategic retrenchment and shifting policy priorities—served as systemic stimuli. Through domestic mediating

variables such as state–society relations, leadership perceptions, and strategic culture, these pressures ultimately produced the collapse of the Pahlavi monarchy and the emergence of a radically anti-American Islamic Republic (see Figure1).

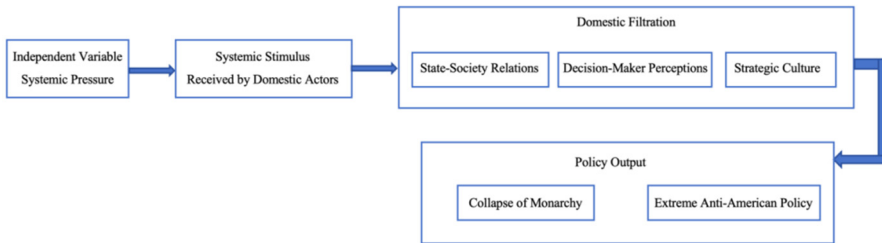


Fig. 1. Theoretical model of domestic foreign policy stimulated by the international system and filtered by domestic politics. (Created by the author)

2.2 Variable Specification

The independent variable consists of international systemic pressures. These include the relative decline of U.S. hegemony after the Vietnam War, the Nixon Doctrine’s emphasis on regional burden-sharing, the Carter administration’s turn toward human rights diplomacy, and Soviet expansion in the Middle East. While U.S. support strengthened Iran’s strategic position, it also increased the Shah’s dependence on American backing. Carter’s human rights rhetoric undermined the regime’s legitimacy while creating uncertainty about U.S. support. Meanwhile, Soviet involvement constrained U.S. intervention options and indirectly aided revolutionary forces.

Domestic intervening variables form the core of the analytical framework. First, state–society relations deteriorated sharply as modernization policies deepened socioeconomic inequality and cultural alienation, leading to the collapse of traditional power balances among monarchy, clergy, intellectuals, and the bazaar. Second, leaders’ perceptions diverged sharply: the Shah overestimated U.S. support and underestimated domestic opposition, while Khomeini accurately perceived both the regime’s weakness and the limits of American intervention. Third, Iran’s strategic culture—rooted in anti-colonial narratives and Shi’a traditions of martyrdom and resistance—facilitated mass mobilization and framed opposition as a moral struggle against imperial domination.

Through these mediating variables, systemic pressures were transformed into revolutionary outcomes.

3 Methodology

This study employs theory-testing process tracing to examine the causal chain linking systemic pressures to revolutionary outcomes [3]. The analysis focuses on the transmission of international signals, their interpretation by key actors, their transformation through domestic political processes, and the resulting policy outcomes. Primary sources, including U.S. government documents and statements by Iranian

revolutionary leaders, are combined with authoritative secondary scholarship to ensure analytical rigor.

4 Systemic Pressure and Domestic Filtering

4.1 Transmission of Systemic Pressure and Domestic Responses

In the late Cold War, the relative decline of U.S. hegemony—exacerbated by the Vietnam War—reshaped Iran's domestic politics. To preserve capitalist leadership and contain Soviet expansion, Washington adopted the 1969 Nixon Doctrine, designating the Pahlavi regime as its primary Persian Gulf ally. Consequently, U.S. military aid surged; between 1973 and 1976, arms sales to Iran totaled \$8.3 billion, exceeding one-third of all U.S. foreign aid [5].

In exchange for U.S. support, the Shah pursued the White Revolution, a program of rapid Western-style industrialization. However, this growth failed to produce long-term stability. Bureaucratic corruption and foreign capital penetration meant that prosperity benefited only the elite; by 1974, the top 20% of Iranians accounted for over half of total consumption. This extreme inequality, paired with rising housing prices and urban poverty, created deep-seated resentment [12]. Furthermore, aggressive Westernization alienated the conservative, religious rural populations, leading clerics to openly challenge the regime.

The 1977 election of Jimmy Carter shifted U.S. policy toward human rights diplomacy, placing the Shah in a strategic dilemma. While the Shah relied on the SAVAK secret police to suppress dissent, Carter's moral rhetoric constrained the regime's heavy-handed tactics [6]. Moderate opposition figures initially hoped U.S. pressure would force constitutional reforms, but Carter's 1977 visit—where he called Iran an “island of stability”—disillusioned them. This frustration triggered mass protests, starting in Qom in early 1978, and pushed the middle class toward the radical leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini.

Fearing abandonment by Washington, the Shah attempted limited liberalization in 1977 to co-opt moderates [18]. This strategy backfired; instead of calming the public, it allowed long-suppressed grievances to erupt into nationwide strikes and million-person demonstrations. The regime's legitimacy collapsed.

Simultaneously, systemic shifts emboldened Khomeini. He used mosque networks to mobilize the masses and signaled a non-aligned future—“Neither West nor East, but Islam”—which diminished U.S. willingness to intervene. Finally, the Soviet Union played a decisive role by supporting the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party and warning the U.S. against military involvement. This combination of domestic uprising and international pressure delivered the final blow to the Pahlavi monarchy.

4.2 Collapse of Domestic Power Balances

Historically, Iranian governance featured a long-standing balance between royal and clerical authority. From the Sassanian period through Islamization, religion consistently served as a counterweight to monarchy [7].

In modern times, Western colonial intrusion and nationalist movements eroded royal authority. Intellectual elites rose as a political force, culminating in the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911. By the mid-20th century, the Tudeh Party emerged as a key representative of intellectuals, commanding significant support among students, professionals, and even the military. Intellectuals thus became a third major political force alongside monarchy and clergy [4].

Initially, intellectuals allied with Reza Shah to pursue modernization and counter clerical power. However, as authoritarianism deepened, monarchy supplanted clerical authority as the main obstacle to democracy. After World War II, intellectual opposition intensified, culminating in Mohammad Mossadegh's premiership and the oil nationalization movement [14]. Although the Shah regained power through the 1953 coup with U.S. backing, he lost the support of intellectuals, clergy, and much of the populace.

Instead of coalition-building, the Shah relied on repression. SAVAK weakened parliamentary institutions and radicalized opposition forces. The White Revolution further alienated rural populations, urban poor, bazaar merchants, and artisans. Economic mismanagement, inflation, and unemployment intensified grievances. Attempts to control guilds in the mid-1970s pushed bazaaris toward the clergy [8]. Meanwhile, military expansion diluted loyalty, enabling revolutionary infiltration [2]. When Khomeini returned to Iran, the regime had lost its most critical pillar of support.

4.3 Strategic Miscalculations

By 1978, the regime faced existential crisis. Yet both the Shah and the Carter administration underestimated the situation. The Shah believed the military could contain protests, failing to recognize eroded loyalty. U.S. intelligence agencies were similarly slow to respond, downplaying unrest until late 1978. By the time serious attention was given, control had already been lost [6].

Carter's internal debates over intervention, constrained by human rights principles, resulted in indecision. Although limited intervention was eventually approved in late December 1978, it came too late. The Shah departed Iran on January 16, 1979. Khomeini returned on February 1, and by February 9 the last royalist forces were defeated.

5 Conclusion

From a neoclassical realist perspective, the Iranian Islamic Revolution was the product of interaction between international systemic pressures and domestic political mediating variables. Systemic factors—U.S. hegemonic decline, human rights diplomacy, and Soviet expansion—created permissive external conditions for change. However, these pressures produced revolutionary outcomes only through domestic filters.

The breakdown of state–society relations, divergent leadership perceptions, and a powerful strategic culture transformed external constraints into revolutionary

momentum. While the Shah responded with hesitation and miscalculation, Khomeini exploited systemic opportunities with decisive strategy and ideological mobilization.

This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating the explanatory value of neoclassical realism for understanding revolutionary and religious states. By integrating internal and external factors within a cross-level framework, it offers a more comprehensive account of why the Pahlavi monarchy collapsed so rapidly and why the Islamic Revolution erupted with such speed. Although based on a single case, the framework invites further comparative research to test its broader applicability.

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