

Exploring Revolution of the Deprived: Relative Deprivation and the Roots of the 1979 Iranian Uprising

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Abstract

This paper explores the theory of relative deprivation to examine the underlying psychological, social, and structural causes of revolutionary conflict, using the 1979 Iranian Revolution as a primary case study. While traditional conflict analyses prioritize objective indicators such as economic disparity and lack of political representation, this study emphasizes subjective perceptions of injustice, cultural alienation, and group-based identity marginalization. Drawing on interviews with individuals who lived through the revolution and extensive historical analysis, the paper explores how decremental, aspirational, and progressive forms of deprivation converged to mobilize diverse societal groups. Religious and cultural grievances, combined with the legacy of foreign intervention—especially the 1953 U.S.-UK-backed coup—created a cumulative sense of betrayal and indignity. Using a conflict management lens, the study argues that subjective experiences of deprivation are central to understanding revolutionary mobilization and that effective peacebuilding strategies must address not only material inequalities but also emotional and symbolic grievances. This framework is broadly applicable to other revolutionary and resistance movements across the globe, offering insight into the psychological dimensions that drive political instability. The paper contributes to a more comprehensive theory of conflict and provides actionable implications for scholars and policymakers addressing contemporary unrest.

Keywords: Relative Deprivation, Conflict Management, Iranian Revolution, Revolutionary Movements, Subjective Injustice

Introduction

This paper, "Exploring Revolution of the Deprived: Relative Deprivation and the Roots of the 1979 Iranian Uprising," investigates how perceived injustices and identity-based grievances fuelled revolutionary momentum in Iran. The 1979 Iranian Revolution is a fundamental moment in modern history that shaped the nation's socio-political landscape (Buchan, 2013). The revolutionary struggle was fueled by widespread discontent and a sense of injustice among sections of society who felt marginalized and oppressed under the rule of the Pahlavi dynasty. This was not Iran's first encounter with social unrest, but rather a continuation of the rebellion of nearly a century earlier. A sense of dislocation, intensified by the wide gap between the ruling class and the hardships faced by the majority population, prompted various factions uniting against the opposition and ultimately overthrowing the regime. Therefore, the

Iranian revolution demonstrates the necessity of analyzing relative deprivation as a catalyst for political change.

Analyzing the demand for revolutionary conflict as revealed through structural differences, this article re-evaluates the concept of relative deprivation and explains its relevance and potential for expanding the theoretical boundaries of conflict management. Rather than seeking causes or attempting to determine the origins of the revolution, relative deprivation ties to the contemporary social and political context, revealing the subjective experience of conflict (Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, & Bialosiewicz, 2012). Various scholars have discussed the role of relative deprivation in enabling individuals and groups to engage in acts of social movement and revolution (Gurr, T. R., 1970); (Runciman, 1966); (Stouffer, Suchman, DeVinney, Star, & Williams Jr, 1949). However, the assessment of relative deprivation with its subjective interpretation is still under research in the field of conflict management. Analyzing relative deprivation through the lens of conflict management, I used (Morrison, 1971) concept of power-oriented revolution in contrast to participatory revolution where, rather than directly seeking to seize power, individuals aim to increase broad participation and representation in governance. On the other hand, power-oriented movements focus on implementing specific policy changes, mainly through campaigns to seize power, overthrow oppressive systems, and revolts, or dismantle authoritarian regimes. To illustrate this concept, the study examines case study of political revolutions that was the result of prevailing feelings of discontent and inequality between different social groups. For this, I used the Iranian revolution of 1979 where subjective perceptions and psychological dynamics played an important role in the conflict.

The study is centered on research questions; how does the concept of relative deprivation develop a nuanced understanding of conflict? The conventional approaches to conflict management focus on objective measures of deprivation such as economic inequality, and lack of access to social opportunities, or resources in the context of revolutionary struggle (Power, Madsen, & Morton, 2020); (Korotayev & Shishkina, 2020); (Siroky, Warner, Filip-Crawford, Berlin, & Neuberger, 2020). These approaches view conflicts through an objectivist lens, emphasizing concrete factors that can be objectively quantified and measured. While these factors are undoubtedly important, they fail to capture the subjective experiences and perceptions of individuals and groups affected by inequality and injustice. It is, therefore, necessary to examine how individuals' identification based on factors such as ethnicity, religion, or class influences their perceptions of relative deprivation and increases intergroup tensions that result in revolutionary conflicts. I first address this gap to contextualize the need for relative deprivation dynamics to go beyond objective measures of deprivation in conflict.

Understanding Deprivation Beyond Objective Measures

The definition of revolution is evolving with the rise of political necessity and dynamics in the field of international conflict. A social revolution is defined as "a rapid, fundamental transformation of the state and class structure of society" (Skocpol, 1979). In contrast, political revolutions transform the structure of the state rather than the social structure, which need not necessarily be accomplished through class conflict (Korpi, 1974). However, along with the changing dynamics of the blend of socio-political conflict, the definition of revolution also seems to be changing. From the 1970s to the 1990s, revolutionary ideologies, ethnic and religious bases for radical mobilization, inter-elite conflicts, and increasing prospects of multi-class alliances were some of the profound geopolitical consequences seen in Iran and many other parts of the world (Goldstone, 2001). Although the definition of revolution has changed over time, its basis for international attention is often derived from a combination of underlying grievances and deprivations linked to the economic, political, and social conflict between the government and its citizens. However, how subjective perceptions of deprivation, injustice, and relative disadvantage can shape the dynamics of conflict remains overlooked within the innate realm of revolution.

Objective measures – often tangible factors that can be empirically verified and proven including quantitative measures such as economic inequality, structural opportunities, or access to resources provide valuable insight into examining the dynamics of revolution through the lens of conflict management. Research on resource conflicts and their impacts on social movements often suggests that clashes arise when different groups try to secure their share of the wealth distribution, especially if the dominant group denies them access (Douma, 2006); (Kassab, Isemann, Halbeisen, & Walther, 2021); (Saleh, 2013). Similarly, examining economic inequalities in the case studies of Kosovo and Tajikistan—findings demonstrate how certain groups or communities experience different levels of economic well-being affected by historical factors such as political autonomy, civil conflict, and migration patterns (Bhaumik, Gang, & Yun, 2006); (Foroughi, 2002). On the other hand, research with the concept of "structural opportunities" in the context of the Iranian Revolution of 1978-1979 shows that the organization of the state was primarily aimed at protecting the monarch and his throne, which led to a system where the shah only retained the authority to make decisions that benefited a small portion of the population (Kurzman, 1996). These findings broadly discuss the factors that contribute to the evolving nature of revolution; however, they disregard how subjective perceptions of individual deprivation, injustice, and relative disadvantage shape conflict dynamics, thereby leaving a gap in understanding the causes and effects of revolution.

There are theoretical foundations for the subjective perception of a

revolutionary conflict that advanced steadily over the past three decades, but a corresponding development in applied practice has not received the attention of many scholars in the field of conflict management. Some research focused on the role of social psychology in identity and inter-group conflict (Cuhadar & Dayton, 2011) while others focus on subjective conditions such as "social and political integration as a result of shared acceptance of value systems and conflicts" in revolutionary conflict (Maravall, 1976). This trend of research is strengthened to analyze the various dynamics of subjective realities related to ethnic, religious, and cultural conflicts (Bai & Wu, 2023); (Langer & Ukiwo, 2009); (Watts & Houtman, 2023). Regarding the relationship between deprivation and political discontent, research often states that actors are held responsible by actions for the commission or deprivation and that the utility and desirability of violence motivate those already relatively disadvantaged individuals to organize and participate in political violence (Ashrafian, 2023); (Majeed, 1979). Research related to cultural oppression, conflict, and deprivation shows such oppression as a precondition that invites other forms of oppression, such as political and economic by a particular regime. When governments explicitly or implicitly design policies that oppress one group over another, it usually reflects cultural differences between particular groups. This oppressive group is embodied as the dominant group and is reserved only for members of the dominant culture, while members of the minority culture occupy a position at the bottom of the stratification hierarchy. It therefore "creates a cultural division of labor, where people of higher status occupy the upper class" (Macrina, 2004); (Schock, 1996). Similarly, when analyzing ethnic conflicts and revolution, the research shows that 'excluded ethnic groups are more vulnerable to rebellion' (Cederman, Wimmer, & Min, 2010); (Koos, 2016). In particular, studies of the effects of ethnic insurgency on political deprivation show that violent insurgency can increase the likelihood of politically disadvantaged ethnic groups overcoming their deprivation. While the power imbalance between the state and rebel groups may seem daunting, the goal of these groups is often not a total victory but rather increasing the costs of repression to a point where granting political authority becomes a more favorable option for those in power.

Scholars have widely discussed the role of relative deprivation in motivating revolutionary movements, but there is limited research on how this theory can inform conflict management strategies. Analyzing the role of relative deprivation in conflict management, the research aims to contribute to the development of more effective strategies to address and mitigate conflicts driven by perceptions of injustice and inequality. By focusing on subjective measures of deprivation, such as perceptions of deprivation and relative disadvantage, the research aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the psychological and emotional dimensions that influence individuals' motivation and behavior in

conflict situations. While considerable progress has been made in theoretical frameworks regarding identity, intergroup conflict, and the objective conditions of conflict, relatively little attention has been paid to the subjective reality of situations, including socio-economic and political phenomena, particularly in conflicts that combine to turn into revolutions. It is important to understand that the level of deprivation influences individuals' motivation and behavior in revolutionary conflict, extending beyond purely objective measures to include the subtle psychological and emotional factors that motivate engagement in such activities. Thus, by including subjective measures of deprivation in our analyses, this study can provide a more holistic understanding of conflict dynamics and develop more effective strategies for conflict management and peacebuilding.

Conceptual Framework: Subjective Measures in Understanding Conflict

I situate this research of relative deprivation in the broader literature on conflict management and peacebuilding. Stoffer (1940) introduced relative deprivation as the belief that people compare themselves to others to demonstrate a sense of deprivation or entitlement. (Runciman, 1966) further broadened the concept of relative deprivation and argued that a person may believe that he or she is personally deprived or that the social group to which he or she belongs is deprived. Extending this argument, (Runciman, 1966) linked feelings of group relative deprivation to group-serving attitudes and behaviors such as collectivism and outgroup prejudice, while individual relative deprivation is associated with individual-serving attitudes and behaviors such as academic achievement and property crime. In the following decades, scholars incorporated relative deprivation into larger models of social comparison, causal attribution, equity, and social identity theory (e.g., (Crosby, 1982); (Folger, 1987); (Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke, 1999); (Walker & Pettigrew, 1984). For example, social identity research shows that people will experience group relative deprivation if the intergroup situation is viewed as illegitimate and impossible to improve without group challenge, and group boundaries are viewed as impenetrable (Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke, 1999). On the one hand, social psychological relative deprivation research focuses on intergroup and interpersonal (superior and opposite) social comparisons, while political science relative deprivation research focuses on comparisons of people's current situations with their past, future, desired, or deserving ones (e.g., (Taylor, Moghaddam, & Bellerose, 2001); (Gurr, T. R., 1970).

However, conflict management received less attention while analyzing the dynamics of relative deprivation. Therefore, the purpose of the present paper is to analyze patterns of deprivation that include central concepts from both the expectation achievement approach and the revolutionary process approach. To this end, the work of Ted Robert Gurr has a significant impact on the understanding of conflict dynamics that can deepen the understanding of relative deprivation in the field of conflict management. Gur refers to deprivation as the

tension arising from the difference between 'ought' and 'is' among collective value satisfaction—which drives individuals to political conflict (2015). This notion encapsulates the intensity of relative scarcity, which fluctuates greatly based on the perceived variance between value expectations and capabilities. Essentially, it delves into people's desires, expectations, and their differential capacity to fulfill those desires. (Gurr, 2015) contends that individuals are more inclined to rebel when they perceive their social values as unattainable, with the severity of discontent correlating with factors such as depression and inflation. In short, the intensity of relative deprivation in political participation, prosperity, collective/communal values, and social status can lead to a 'deterioration of ideological cohesion' which consequently disrupts the social order and results in rebellion. Thus, (Gurr, T. R., 1970) suggests that 'the greater the intensity of deprivation, the greater the magnitude of violence' leading to political revolution. The following three patterns have been cited as elements or predisposing factors of revolutionary conflict.

Decremental Deprivation

Decremental deprivation is a critical concept within the framework of relative deprivation which refers to a decline in access to previously available resources, opportunities, or social status, leading to heightened tensions and grievances. Rooted in the broader theories of relative deprivation outlined by Gurr (2015), decremental deprivation plays a vital role in shaping collective discontent and mobilizing political or social unrest. Decremental deprivation occurs when individuals or groups experience a significant reduction in their quality of life, access to resources, or social opportunities, especially when these reductions are viewed as unjust or avoidable. From a conflict management perspective, decremental deprivation is understood as a form of social unrest by undermining ideological cohesion within affected groups. When previously attainable social values, such as equality, prosperity, or political participation, are perceived to be slipping away, individuals and communities may adopt radical strategies to address these perceived inequities. This phenomenon is particularly evident in contexts where groups have historically enjoyed a degree of privilege or stability and are now grappling with a decline in their societal standing.

As (Runciman, 1966) suggests, the loss of these advantages fosters group-serving behaviors such as outgroup prejudice and collective action, often manifesting as protests or uprisings. The effects of decremental deprivation are magnified in environments where social comparisons play a significant role. Social identity theory underscores that groups are likely to perceive decremental deprivation as illegitimate when intergroup boundaries are viewed as impermeable (Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke, 1999). This perceived illegitimacy intensifies grievances, as marginalized groups attribute their

declining status to systemic inequities or intentional exploitation by dominant groups. In this sense, decremental deprivation is not merely an economic or social phenomenon but also a deeply psychological one, intertwined with issues of identity, equity, and justice.

Aspirational Deprivation

Aspirational deprivation, a core element in the study of relative deprivation, emerges when individuals or groups experience a widening gap between their aspirations and the realities of their current circumstances. This concept, articulated by (Gurr, 2015), underscores the tension generated when individuals develop heightened expectations for their future prospects but find these aspirations unmet due to systemic barriers, economic constraints, or social inequities. From a conflict management perspective, aspirational deprivation serves as a significant predictor of unrest, particularly in societies undergoing rapid socioeconomic transitions.

As noted by (Runciman, 1966), group-level aspirations are often shaped by comparative processes, where individuals assess their circumstances relative to others in their community or across societies. When these comparisons highlight systemic inequities or failures in governance, aspirational deprivation becomes a rallying point for collective action. Social identity theory further reinforces this dynamic by emphasizing the role of perceived legitimacy in shaping grievances (Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke, 1999). Groups that perceive their aspirations as valid but unattainable due to entrenched structural inequalities are more likely to mobilize against perceived oppressors, often resorting to protests, strikes, or even insurgencies. Historical and contemporary examples illustrate the profound impact of aspirational deprivation on societal stability. The Arab Spring uprisings, for instance, were fueled by widespread frustrations among youth populations who aspired to better living conditions and political freedoms but faced systemic repression and unemployment.

Progressive Deprivation

Progressive deprivation, a nuanced form of relative deprivation, captures the frustration and discontent arising when individuals or groups experience a growing disparity between their expectations and actual circumstances over time. Rooted in Ted Robert (Gurr, 2015) seminal work on deprivation and conflict, this concept emphasizes the cumulative nature of discontent as aspirations outpace achievements. The phenomenon of progressive deprivation is intricately tied to the dynamics of societal modernization and socio-political evolution.

One notable example is the Civil Rights Movement in the United States during the mid-20th century. Despite incremental progress in civil rights legislation, African Americans faced persistent systemic racism and economic inequality, leading to growing disillusionment and mobilization for broader

societal change. (Gurr, T. R., 1970) analysis highlights that the progressive nature of unmet aspirations played a significant role in shaping the movement's trajectory. From a conflict management perspective, addressing progressive deprivation requires a multifaceted approach that acknowledges both the material and psychological dimensions of discontent. Social identity theory underscores the importance of perceived legitimacy in mitigating grievances (Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke, 1999). Thus, efforts to bridge the gap between expectations and realities must involve transparent communication, participatory decision-making, and tangible improvements in quality of life.

Methodology

To understand the concept of relative deprivation for a nuanced understanding of conflict management, I interviewed ten participants aged 65 years and older. The participants were selected for their lived experiences of the political and social climate during the 1979 Iranian Revolution, providing firsthand insights into how perceptions of deprivation and injustice shaped the dynamics of the revolution. These interviews were semi-structured, allowing for flexibility in responses while ensuring that key topics related to relative deprivation, such as socio-economic disparities, cultural oppression, and political disenfranchisement, were covered. Participants were encouraged to share personal anecdotes, emphasizing the psychological and emotional dimensions of their experiences, which are often overlooked in traditional analyses of revolutionary conflicts.

The interview data are supplemented with a comprehensive review of existing literature, including historical documents, newspaper articles, and scholarly works, which helped contextualize the subjective perceptions of deprivation among different social groups. The aim was to explore how feelings of injustice, fueled by systemic inequality, were not just individual but collective experiences that transcended economic conditions alone. Furthermore, the study incorporated a historical approach to better understand the long-term effects of the Iranian Revolution on the participants' lives. By examining the lasting psychological and social consequences of the revolution, I was able to assess how perceptions of relative deprivation persisted over time, even after the political landscape had shifted. This longitudinal perspective is essential for understanding the role of historical memory in the dynamics of political conflict, particularly in post-revolutionary societies. Overall, this methodology combines qualitative interviews with historical analysis to provide a nuanced exploration of relative deprivation in the context of revolutionary conflict.

Pre-1979 Dynamics

The Iranian Revolution of 1979, as illuminated through the findings of this study, was not an isolated event but the culmination of a long historical trajectory of sociopolitical unrest, deeply rooted in the experience of subjective

deprivation. The pre-1979 dynamics offer valuable insights into how perceptions of injustice, systemic marginalization, and foreign interference intersected to create a groundswell of revolutionary fervor. This historical continuum is characterized by a persistent cycle of discontent, mobilization, and resistance, with alliances between religious leaders and civil groups playing a decisive role.

The foundation for the 1979 Revolution can be traced to earlier moments of resistance, such as the Tobacco Protests of 1891. These protests were driven by widespread resentment over foreign concessions, such as the one granted to the Imperial Tobacco Company by Nasir al-Din Shah, which symbolized both the encroachment of imperial powers and the disregard for local sovereignty. The mobilization of civil society alongside Shiite religious leaders during these protests exemplified the power of collective action rooted in shared grievances. This successful annulment of the tobacco concession highlighted a key theme in Iranian history: the critical role of perceived injustice in galvanizing opposition and fostering alliances between diverse social groups.

This spirit of resistance was further cemented during the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911. The movement sought to challenge autocratic rule and establish a parliamentary system that could better represent the aspirations of the Iranian people. While the revolution ultimately faltered, it reaffirmed the alliance between religious and civil groups, creating a legacy of cooperation that would later become instrumental in the success of the 1979 Revolution. These early movements underscored a recurring pattern: the Iranian people's struggle for sovereignty and accountability often emerged in response to systemic exploitation, elite domination, and external interference.

The establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925 ushered in a new era of state-building and modernization under Reza Shah. While these efforts aimed to transform Iran into a modern state, they often exacerbated social inequalities and alienated key segments of the population. Reza Shah's authoritarian policies—such as forced conscription, secularization, and suppression of dissent—deepened the divide between the state and its people, particularly among rural communities and religious factions. His successor, Mohammad Reza Shah, inherited a legacy of discontent that was further amplified by his own autocratic governance, reliance on foreign support, and disregard for the needs of marginalized groups. The historical context provided by the pre-1979 dynamics underscores the central role of subjective deprivation in driving collective mobilization. The grievances that fueled the revolution were not merely material but deeply emotional, rooted in a shared sense of injustice and exclusion. These findings offer a richer understanding of the revolution's causes and highlight the importance of addressing both structural and psychological dimensions of inequality in preventing large-scale unrest.

The White Revolution and the June Uprising

The White Revolution, launched by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1963,

marked an ambitious series of reforms under the banner of modernization and socio-economic transformation. Officially termed the "Revolution of the Shah and the People," it was designed to be a bloodless initiative aimed at addressing the socio-economic and political aspirations of the Iranian public (Ansari, 2001). The Shah's reform agenda, including land redistribution, industrial modernization, and women's enfranchisement, signaled a radical departure from the traditional structure of Iranian society. Yet, despite its progressive façade, the White Revolution sowed the seeds of widespread discontent, exposing the subjective deprivation experienced by large segments of the population.

The Shah's emphasis on socio-economic modernization inadvertently alienated various factions of society. While land reform programs redistributed land to millions of farmers and introduced rural cooperatives, they also disrupted traditional agrarian structures, leaving many small farmers and laborers economically insecure. These reforms, though ostensibly aimed at increasing agricultural productivity and reducing rural inequality, failed to meet the expectations of marginalized groups who found themselves excluded from the promised benefits.

This sense of subjective deprivation, rooted in both economic and cultural grievances, was compounded by the Shah's authoritarian approach to governance. The suppression of political parties such as the Tudeh and the National Front eliminated channels for political expression and dissent, leaving opposition groups with no recourse but to channel their frustrations into grassroots movements. The secularization of Iran's legal and educational systems—symbolized by measures such as the examination process for clerical positions and the establishment of Western-style education—diminished the role of the clergy (ulama), further alienating religious groups who perceived these reforms as a direct attack on their cultural and religious identity (Ansari, 2001).

The bazaar, traditionally a stronghold of Iran's economic and social life, became a focal point of opposition to the Shah's reforms. Merchants and market vendors, many of whom engaged in traditional trade, faced growing marginalization as the government prioritized modern industries and Western economic models. For those tied to traditional values and deeply intertwined with the clergy, the Shah's reforms represented not progress but cultural erosion. This alliance between the religious community and the bazaari class became a cornerstone of the resistance to the Shah's regime.

The June Uprising of 1963 (June 5th and 6th protests) epitomized the growing dissatisfaction with the White Revolution. Sparked by the arrest of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who had publicly denounced the Shah's policies, the protests mobilized a broad coalition of middle-class citizens, religious fundamentalists, and university students. Khomeini's arrest became a rallying point, uniting disparate factions under the banner of opposition to the Shah. The protests, though brutally suppressed, marked a critical juncture in the

revolutionary movement, demonstrating the convergence of political, economic, and religious grievances.

The early warning signs embedded in the June Uprising foreshadowed the larger-scale upheaval of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The alliance between the market and the mosque, rooted in shared opposition to the Shah's policies, became a defining feature of the revolutionary movement. By eroding traditional structures and failing to address the subjective experiences of deprivation among key segments of society, the White Revolution inadvertently catalyzed the very forces it sought to suppress. The grievances expressed during this period, shaped by economic insecurity, cultural alienation, and political disenfranchisement, highlight the critical role of perceived injustice in driving revolutionary movements.

In the broader context of subjective deprivation, the White Revolution serves as a powerful example of how reforms intended to modernize and equalize society can backfire when they fail to align with the values, expectations, and lived experiences of the population. The Shah's inability to address these subjective dimensions of deprivation transformed the White Revolution into a precursor to the larger, more transformative Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Foreign Influences and Imperial Ambitions

Iran's resentment toward foreign powers predates the revolution and is anchored in a long history of imperial interference and exploitative treaties. The Treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkmanchai (1828), which ended the Russo-Persian Wars, were perceived as monumental losses that ceded vast northern territories to Russia and granted extensive economic privileges to foreign powers. Similarly, the Treaty of Paris (1857), which resulted in the loss of Herat and Afghanistan to Britain, reinforced a sense of national humiliation. These treaties were not only physical losses of territory but also symbolic wounds to Iran's sovereignty and dignity. These historical grievances created a deep psychological impact, fostering a collective memory of subjugation and betrayal, which remained a critical undercurrent in Iranian society.

The tobacco protest of 1891 further exemplifies this growing resentment. While ostensibly an economic grievance against the British monopoly on tobacco, it represented a broader dissatisfaction with foreign dominance and domestic complicity. This protest marked one of the first instances where the Iranian people collectively mobilized against foreign influence, foreshadowing the revolutionary spirit of 1979. The cumulative effect of these events—perceived as infringements on Iran's sovereignty—created a shared sense of deprivation that extended beyond material losses to encompass cultural and national identity.

Britain and Russia: Exploitation and Imperial Partitioning

The roles of Britain and Russia in shaping Iran's political landscape were pivotal in solidifying the Iranian people's perception of foreign domination. The Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907, which divided Iran into spheres of influence, epitomized this exploitation. The agreement formalized Iran's status as a pawn in the imperial ambitions of these two powers, reducing the country to a dependent and divided entity. This sense of subordination was further exacerbated by the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran during World War II, under the pretense of reducing German influence. Despite promises of a temporary occupation, the prolonged presence of British and Soviet forces deepened Iranian frustration and reinforced perceptions of imperial betrayal. These experiences fostered a collective awareness of systemic exploitation, further fueling the subjective sense of injustice and deprivation.

The United States: From Ally to Oppressor

Iran's relationship with the United States followed a distinct trajectory compared to its relations with Britain and Russia. Initially characterized by mutual respect and support during the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, this relationship deteriorated drastically in the mid-20th century. The 1953 coup d'état orchestrated by the CIA, in collaboration with Britain's SIS, was a watershed moment that irrevocably altered Iranian perceptions of the United States. The overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, a democratically elected leader who had sought to nationalize Iran's oil industry, symbolized a betrayal of Iranian sovereignty and democracy.

From 1953 to 1979, the U.S. support for the Pahlavi monarchy further alienated the Iranian populace. While the Shah's modernization policies, backed by the U.S., aimed to transform Iran into a modern state, they often disregarded cultural and social realities. The state's focus on economic growth and alignment with American interests led to widespread public dissatisfaction, particularly regarding the erosion of civil liberties, suppression of dissent, and concentration of wealth among the elite. The American alliance with the Shah came to symbolize imperialism, repression, and the prioritization of foreign interests over the needs of the Iranian people. This deepened the collective sense of subjective deprivation, as the population perceived their aspirations for independence and justice as being systematically undermined by an imperialist agenda.

Popular Mobilization

The subjective deprivation felt by Iranians in the lead-up to 1979 was not solely economic or political—it was profoundly psychological. The humiliation of past treaties, the exploitation of resources, and the perceived betrayal by foreign powers created a pervasive sense of injustice and unfulfilled national potential. The revolution became a unifying platform for diverse groups—

religious clerics, nationalists, and leftists—who channeled their grievances into a collective struggle against imperialism and domestic tyranny.

The 1979 revolution was thus not just a reaction to immediate grievances but a culmination of over a century of perceived subjugation. It represented a rejection of idolatry, repression, and foreign domination, driven by the Iranian people's deep-seated desire for sovereignty, justice, and self-determination. By addressing the psychological dimensions of deprivation alongside material and political factors, the revolution exemplified how historical memory, and collective emotions can mobilize a society toward transformative change. This analysis underscores the importance of understanding subjective deprivation in explaining the broader dynamics of the Iranian Revolution and its enduring impact on U.S.-Iran relations.

1953 Iranian coup d'état

Oil has long been a central driver of Iran's political and economic struggles, reflecting the broader theme of subjective deprivation rooted in foreign exploitation and domestic inequality. The discovery of oil in 1901 led to the infamous *D'Arcy Concession*, signed by Shah Mozaffar al-Din Qajar. This agreement granted British prospector William Knox D'Arcy exclusive rights to explore, extract, and refine Iran's oil for 60 years, leaving Iran with only a meager 16% share of the annual profits (Brew, 2017); (Navabi, 2010). The concession not only exemplified foreign economic dominance but also amplified feelings of humiliation and deprivation among the Iranian population. In 1914, the British government gained majority control of the company—later renamed the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC)—further entrenching Britain's imperial ambitions over Iranian resources (Lucey, 2019).

The AIOC's success, particularly through the Abadan oil refinery, which supplied 85% of the British Royal Navy and Royal Air Force's fuel needs during its peak, starkly contrasted with the economic suffering and exploitation endured by the Iranian people. British management at AIOC subjected Iranian workers to racism, poor working conditions, and negligible wages, deepening economic disparity and stoking resentment. This period reflected a profound sense of subjective deprivation, as Iran's resources were exploited to fuel British prosperity while the Iranian people faced worsening poverty and social inequality (Toprani, 2019).

In response to these injustices, nationalist sentiment gained traction, spearheaded by Mohammad Mossadegh, a prominent politician in the Majlis and a staunch opponent of British imperialism. By 1949, Mossadegh had established the National Front, a coalition of secular nationalists, ulama, and other reform-minded individuals, who called for an end to foreign control over Iranian oil (Brew, G., 2019). Mossadegh's vision of nationalizing the oil industry resonated deeply with the Iranian populace, who viewed it as a path toward reclaiming national sovereignty and addressing the deep-seated

grievances of exploitation and humiliation.

Despite Britain's attempts to appease Iran by renegotiating the concession terms and doubling Iran's share of profits, the moves were perceived as insincere and insufficient. Inspired by ARAMCO's 50/50 profit-sharing agreements with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, Mossadegh and the National Front demanded similar terms for the AIOC. However, Britain's refusal to compromise only strengthened Mossadegh's popularity, and in 1951, he was elected Prime Minister. On May 1, 1951, Mossadegh enacted the historic nationalization of the AIOC, a move that was widely celebrated by Iranians as a step toward sovereignty and justice (Kinzer, 2008); (Rees, 2013).

This nationalization, however, provoked a fierce reaction from Britain, which viewed it as a direct challenge to its economic and imperial interests. Britain imposed an oil embargo on Iran, crippling its economy, while simultaneously lobbying the United States for support. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, expressed interest in allying with Mossadegh, recognizing the opportunity to expand its influence in the region. This convergence of British and Soviet threats placed Iran at the center of Cold War geopolitics, amplifying U.S. concerns about the possibility of Iran falling into the communist bloc (Abrahamian, 2001).

For the United States, the primary concern was not oil but the strategic implications of Soviet influence in Iran. With the economic embargo fueling domestic unrest and the Communist Tudeh Party gaining momentum, the Eisenhower administration feared that Iran could become a communist state. Britain, however, saw the situation as an opportunity to restore its control over AIOC by removing Mossadegh and reinstalling a pro-British Shah. These overlapping but distinct interests led to a covert operation orchestrated by the CIA and Britain's SIS to oust Mossadegh (Kinzer, 2008); (Soghomonyan, 2022).

The operation, known as *Operation Ajax*, initially failed but succeeded in its second attempt on August 19, 1953. The coup overthrew Mossadegh, ending Iran's brief experiment with democratic governance and reinstating the Shah's autocratic rule. This event not only marked a turning point in Iran's political history but also deepened the Iranian people's sense of subjective deprivation. The coup symbolized the continuation of foreign interference and betrayal, particularly by the United States, which had previously been seen as a potential ally.

The 1953 coup further entrenched feelings of disenfranchisement and humiliation among the Iranian populace, laying the groundwork for the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The cumulative impact of exploitation, suppression of civil liberties, and the prioritization of foreign interests over domestic well-being fueled widespread discontent. The coup remains a critical juncture in understanding the dynamics of subjective deprivation, as it highlights the

intersection of historical grievances, economic injustice, and foreign domination in shaping Iran's contemporary political and social identity.

Religious Populism and the Role of Religious Leaders

Religion has played a profound role in shaping Iranian politics, acting as both a cultural foundation and a political force throughout the country's history. During the Constitutional Revolution (1906–1911), religious leaders and the ulama emerged as key players, influencing socio-political contexts and aligning themselves with nationalist and reformist causes (Ansari, A. M., 2016); (Batmanghelidj, 20136); (Kazemi, 2014). Their involvement set a precedent for the significant role of religious populism in Iranian political dynamics.

Before the first CIA-orchestrated coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, the seeds of mistrust were deliberately sown. Propaganda campaigns, aimed at eroding public confidence in Mossadegh, also targeted religious leaders such as Ayatollah Kashani. These efforts created a rift between Kashani and Mossadegh, ultimately leading Kashani and his followers to oppose Mossadegh in the Majlis and tacitly support the coup (Kinzer, 2008). This episode highlighted the vulnerabilities within Iran's political fabric, where external actors leveraged internal divisions, including those involving religious figures, to achieve strategic goals.

Following the 1953 coup, the Pahlavi regime under Mohammad Reza Shah introduced a modernization agenda that alienated significant portions of Iranian society. While framed as progressive, these reforms—including land redistribution and economic modernization under the White Revolution—were perceived as dismissive of religious and cultural values. Critics described the regime as autocratic, highly centralized, dependent on Western powers, and dismissive of democratic principles (Ansari, 2001); (Ramzani, 1974). The lack of attention to religious sentiments fostered widespread resentment, with religious leaders emerging as vocal opponents of the Shah's policies.

Among these leaders, Ruhollah Khomeini became a central figure in opposing the Shah's government. Khomeini's criticism of the regime was not limited to its modernization efforts but also extended to its alignment with Western powers, particularly the United States. For instance, the 1964 decision to grant diplomatic immunity to U.S. military personnel stationed in Iran fueled anger among the religious clergy and their supporters, further amplifying anti-Shah sentiments (Pfau, 1974); (Tirman, 2009). Khomeini denounced the Shah's government as tyrannical, positioning himself as a defender of Iran's religious and cultural identity (Guerrero, 2016); (Milani, 2005).

The Shah's government responded to this growing dissent with repression, including Khomeini's exile to Turkey, Iraq, and later France, where he continued to rally opposition against the regime (Vahabi, 2016). Despite these efforts to suppress dissent, the Pahlavi regime's inability to reconcile modernization with respect for religious and cultural values deepened public dissatisfaction. This

discontent simmered through the 1960s and 1970s, with protests and demonstrations gradually coalescing into a broader revolutionary movement.

By the mid-1970s, a convergence of old grievances and new socio-political factors set the stage for the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The mobilization of civilians, fueled by religious clerics and opposition groups, evolved through distinct phases, each marked by strategic adaptations to counter state repression. The revolution ultimately represented a culmination of structural, religious, and political discontent. Religious leaders, particularly Khomeini, played a pivotal role in unifying disparate factions under a shared vision of resistance against the Shah's regime.

This revolutionary upheaval underscored the enduring power of religious populism in Iran's political landscape. The influence of religious leaders was not only instrumental in opposing modernization efforts perceived as antithetical to Iranian identity but also in galvanizing public discontent into a coherent and sustained revolutionary movement. The events leading to the 1979 Revolution exemplify the intricate interplay between subjective deprivation, religious populism, and the mobilization of collective action in response to perceived social and political injustices.

Analysis and Conclusion

The application of relative deprivation theory to revolutionary conflict, as demonstrated in this study, offers a multidimensional lens through which to analyze the complex interplay of structural, psychological, and cultural grievances. Using the 1979 Iranian Revolution as a case study, this paper reveals that subjective experiences of deprivation rooted in identity, expectation, and historical memory are not peripheral but central to understanding the dynamics of revolutionary mobilization. It establishes relative deprivation as not merely a theoretical abstraction but a valuable diagnostic tool in the field of conflict management.

This study challenges the objectivist framework that dominates traditional conflict analysis. Whereas conventional approaches rely on economic indicators and access to social resources as primary indicators of deprivation (Korotayev & Shishkina, 2020); (Siroky, Warner, Filip-Crawford, Berlin, & Neuberger, 2020), the present analysis demonstrates that perceptions of injustice often precede—or even supersede—material inequality as triggers of collective action. As Gurr (1970, 2015) posits, the more acute the discrepancy between what individuals or groups believe they deserve (“ought”) and what they experience (“is”), the greater the likelihood of political unrest. This framework was substantiated by interviews conducted with Iranian citizens who witnessed the revolution. Their testimonies, rich with emotional and historical references, underscored that their discontent stemmed not only from poverty or political repression but from perceived indignities and loss of national and cultural identity.

This qualitative depth is further enriched by the threefold typology of deprivation—decremental, aspirational, and progressive—that emerges from the data. Decremental deprivation explains the rage of groups who had experienced loss: the erosion of religious authority, the dismantling of traditional power structures, and the alienation of cultural institutions. Aspirational deprivation, by contrast, centers on unmet expectations; it characterizes those who believed modernization would yield social mobility and opportunity but instead encountered systemic barriers and elite capture. Progressive deprivation adds a longitudinal dimension: it charts how recurring failure to meet growing expectations over time leads to chronic disillusionment and radicalization. These three dimensions are not siloed; they often reinforce one another, creating compounding grievance structures that drive mobilization.

For instance, the Shah's White Revolution—an ostensibly modernizing initiative—exemplifies all three forms. Land reforms redistributed power and property but often left peasants economically insecure (Ramazani, 1974); urban youth exposed to Westernized education systems aspired to professional and political inclusion, only to be marginalized by nepotism and systemic corruption (Ansari, 2001); and the state's continued disregard for religious sentiment led to cumulative discontent, particularly among the clergy and bazaar class. This layering of grievances created a volatile atmosphere wherein diverse sectors of society—urban, rural, religious, secular—found common cause in opposition to the regime.

Social identity theory provides additional insight into how these grievances translated into collective mobilization. Individuals do not experience deprivation in isolation; they compare their status and treatment to that of other groups (Runciman, 1966); (Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke, 1999). When group boundaries are perceived as impermeable and existing disparities as illegitimate, grievances intensify. In Iran, many perceived the Pahlavi regime as privileging a Westernized elite at the expense of religious, rural, and working-class citizens. These perceptions were further inflamed by historical memory: the 1953 CIA-backed coup, the D'Arcy Oil Concession, and decades of foreign interference had produced a collective sense of humiliation and exploitation. The revolution, then, was not just a material uprising; it was a quest for dignity, sovereignty, and self-determination.

Importantly, this study demonstrates the relevance of relative deprivation theory to conflict management and peacebuilding. Policies that address only material needs—economic reforms, infrastructure, or employment programs—will fall short if they ignore the psychological and identity-based dimensions of discontent. As (Folger, 1987); (Crosby, 1982) have argued, perceptions of fairness, legitimacy, and recognition are essential for social cohesion. For conflict management strategies to be effective, they must attend to both tangible and intangible dimensions of deprivation. Interventions should be culturally

sensitive, historically informed, and inclusive of marginalized voices—especially those shaped by long-standing intergroup inequalities and exclusions.

This analysis also suggests important directions for future research. While the present study highlights religious and ethnic identity as core sources of grievance, it gestures toward the gendered and generational dimensions of relative deprivation. For example, young people aspiring to modernity but facing exclusion, or women negotiating new roles amid state-imposed religious orthodoxy, represent underexplored areas within this framework. Additionally, while the focus here is on Iran, the theoretical insights are broadly transferable. The Arab Spring, racial justice movements in the United States, and indigenous uprisings across Latin America all display similar patterns of subjective deprivation shaped by perceived injustice, historical trauma, and identity-based marginalization.

In conclusion, the Iranian Revolution, viewed through the lens of relative deprivation, reveals how perceptions of injustice rooted in personal, collective, and historical experiences can drive large-scale social transformation. This paper advocates for the integration of subjective deprivation into conflict analysis and peacebuilding discourse. Doing so allows scholars and policymakers to move beyond surface-level diagnoses and toward more nuanced, empathetic, and effective solutions to the root causes of political violence.

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