



The Conceptual Application of the Social Imaginary in Analyzing Government-Society Relations during the First Pahlavi Period

Zainab Mahdavifar, Ali Asghar Davoudi* , Ahmad Javanshiri

Department of Political Science, Ma. C., Islamic Azad University, Mashhad, Iran.

*Corresponding author: ali.davoudi@iau.ac.ir

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Abstract:

The First Pahlavi Period holds significant importance regarding Iran's breaking from its traditional era and entering the modern world. A substantial part of this transformation stemmed from a shift in understanding the state and its functions. This understanding is derived from constructing an imagination that shaped the state during this period. This article aims to demonstrate imaginaries' role in forming the state during the First Pahlavi Period. Based on this, the main question is: to what extent can the conceptual framework of social imaginary or collective mentality be utilized to analyze the relations between the state and society during the First Pahlavi Period? The thematic analysis method has been employed for data analysis, relying on magazines, newspapers, stories, books, and political memoirs. The creators of the social imaginary during this period were intellectuals and writers, clerics, and Reza Shah himself. The research findings indicate that the shared imagination of intellectuals and clerics regarding the state during this period, driven by instability and the rise of separatist sentiments, established a centralized and powerful government. Clerics supported the fall of the Qajar dynasty and the rise of Reza Shah. It was while they opposed the idea of a republic, as they viewed it a form of government opposing Islam. Ultimately, Reza Shah conceded to this demand, abandoning the aspirations for the presidency and declaring the monarchy instead. During his 16-year reign, Reza Shah aligned his policies with the intellectuals' imagination of the state, centering his actions around themes such as nationalism, the revival of ancient Iranian civilization, modernization, and Western-style development and progress. Thus, a new imagination was created that viewed the state as a provider of order and security and as responsible and proactive in developing military, educational, cultural, economic, judicial, and administrative systems.

Keywords: Civil society; Clerics; Intellectuals; Reza shah Pahlavi; Social imaginary; State construction

Introduction

The state is the primary actor in the political arena and plays the most significant role in the social life of communities. The interpretation of the concept of the state is not unitary and cohesive; hence, various schools of thought have theorized about it. Regarding the concept of the state in Iran, most theories have examined it from a classical perspective, which includes theories such as Eastern Despotism (Homayoun Katouzian, Abrahamian, and Khonji), Quasi-Modernism (Homayoun Katouzian), Dependent State (Keddie, Ashraf, Gaziourski, and Ravasani), New Authoritarian State (Bertrand Badie), Rentier State (Mahdavi and Beblawi), Patrimonialism (Shahabi and Juan Linz), Neo-Patrimonialism (Eisenstadt), and Absolute State

(Mirahmadi). In almost all of the aforementioned cases, "objective" factors such as climate type, rigid and inherited traditions, military force, bureaucracy, and rentier economy have been examined in analyzing the structure and functioning of the state in Iran. In contrast, the role of "cognitive-constructivist" factors has been overlooked. Except for a few Iranian writers who have analyzed the relationships between the state and society from a "discursive" perspective, fewer thinkers have addressed the structure of the state and its relations with society from the angle of "imaginary social constructs." Meanwhile, the understanding and perception of the state in Iran and its relationship with society are primarily influenced by people's mindsets about the state, their expectations of it, the connections they maintain

with it, and the interactions between the public and the state. Therefore, we aim to examine the role of mental constructs in analyzing the relations between the state and civil society during the First Pahlavi Period, which is significant for the following reasons:

Firstly, during this period, we witness the creation of a new identity for Iran. In the Qajar era, Iran was more of a tribal and clan-based structure than a nation-state, where the tribal chief held the ultimate authority, and individuals did not recognize an identity beyond their tribe or group. After the fall of the Qajar dynasty, intellectuals entered the social arena to create a new identity for Iran. They believed that to achieve development and progress, a nation must first be formed under the banner of a modern state. After the fall of the Qajar dynasty, intellectuals entered the social sphere to create a new identity for Iran. They believed that to achieve development and progress; a nation must first be formed under the auspices of a modern state. For this purpose, they promoted nationalist and nationalist ideas in intellectual circles. Since Reza Shah did not have an aristocratic background and was seeking an identity for himself, he supported this movement. Thus, the emphasis on ancient Iran's rituals, customs, and history was promoted in magazines, newspapers, and textbooks, leading to a new interpretation of identity for Iranians.

Secondly, the end of the Qajar era marked a transition for Iran from a traditional world to a modern one. During this time, Reza Shah resolved to guide Iran toward development and progress. To this end, he undertook initiatives such as the establishment of a modern army, the founding of Tehran University, the construction of a national railway, the creation of a new bureaucracy, the standardization of clothing, the building of Iran's first airport, and more. These actions transformed Iran's image from a traditional country to a semi-modern one.

Thirdly, the model of "republic" was introduced as a new and modern form of political system for Iran for the first time during this period. Before this, the constitutional monarchy was the governing system in Iran; however, the components and institutions of constitutionalism had become entirely ceremonial and ineffective. Simultaneously with the declaration of a republic in Turkey and the departure of Ahmad Shah from Iran in November 1923, the whispers of establishing a republic in Iran were also heard. In December of that year, republican representatives submitted a three-article proposal to the National Assembly to abolish the Qajar monarchy and establish a republican system. Despite the support of many intellectuals, the proposal faced opposition from the clergy, and ultimately, Reza Shah was dissuaded from pursuing it. Indeed, the republican proposal in Iran did not conclude at this stage. However, the fact that it was created as a form of government in the collective consciousness of Iranians was significant. When the Pahlavi regime fell, the revolutionaries of 1979 presented the "republic" as an ideal form of government alongside the Islamic character of the political system.

The aforementioned transformations significantly impacted the objective and subjective spheres of Iranian society. Various theories have been presented regarding the

influence of objective factors on forming the First Pahlavi Period state; however, we intend to elucidate the role of subjective factors. Therefore, the present article aims to explain the role of the imaginary social constructs in the rise of the First Pahlavi Period state. Our main question is to what extent can the conceptual framework of imaginary social constructs or collective mentality be utilized to analyze the relations between the state and civil society during the First Pahlavi Period?

Methodology

Research studies utilize various tools for data collection, including experimental, survey, and documentary methods, based on their nature and objectives. Experimental and survey tools are suitable for quantitative research; however, since the present study falls within the qualitative spectrum, these tools are not practical. Therefore, the data for this article has been gathered in a documentary and library-based manner. In this phase, a specialized bibliography, reputable publications, and online sources were consulted to identify the resources. Subsequently, primary sources, written by witnesses of historical events, were differentiated from secondary sources, which were written by others relying on the primary sources. After that, a scientific filtration was conducted, during which contradictory data, anomalous data (rare data), recurrent data (data that has been repeated several times), and ambiguous data (whose source is unknown) were excluded. In the next phase, which involves data analysis, the "thematic analysis" method was employed. Initially, the data were analyzed and described. The collected data were broken down into smaller segments in this phase through open coding. Then, we interpret the data by identifying the commonalities and differences and categorizing them under larger concepts. In the final stage, we summarize the network of themes and address the research questions and objectives through this.

Research background

In this article, "imaginary social constructs" and "the state" are the two main propositions; therefore, the research sources have been examined around these two axes.

Ghavamaleki and Nasakhian (2018) describe the process of the emergence of constructs in their book *The Power of Imaginary Constructs*: "An imaginary representation of an object that sits in place of the object itself and influences our feelings, beliefs, judgments, and behaviors toward that object." This book contributes to the present article by examining the concept of "imaginary" in terms of its conceptual framework and dimensions; however, it does not elucidate the mechanisms of constructs in the social sphere.

Cornelius Ricoeur (2019) employed the concept of imagination or imagination in his book *The Imaginary Institution of Society* as a critique of Marxism. Castoriadis argues that the imaginary social construct implies that one cannot regard beliefs, culture, and mentality as peripheral to understanding society, institutions, and transformations, nor can they be reduced to the superstructure of society's objective structures.

In his book *Life in the World of Text*, Paul Ricoeur (2019) argues that “understanding” is achieved through intermediaries such as language, text, metaphor, and narrative, which themselves are constructs of imagination. This book is a credible source for the present research as it examines the concepts that influence the formation of imaginary social constructs. However, it does not precisely explain the concept of imaginary social constructs, their dimensions, and their effects.

Safikhani (2012) in “Social Theory in the Imaginary Social Constructs of Contemporary Iran,” Ricoeur (2019) in “Ideology, Ethics, Politics,” all attempt to elucidate the nature and essence of imaginary or social imagination. However, they do not explain how these constructs influence social and political life. Numerous sources regarding the “state” examine the formation of the modern state in Iran from various dimensions.

Theoretical framework

Each society defines and develops an image of the natural world in which it lives and, in each case, tries to construct a meaningful whole that provides a place for objects and natural entities important to collective life, as well as for the society itself, ultimately establishing a particular “world order.” This image, this more or less structured perspective of the entirety of the existing human experience, in each case, utilizes the rational lines of what is given but organizes and subordinates them according to meanings that do not belong to the rational order (nor do they belong to a positive irrational order), but rather to the imaginary (Castoriadis, 1998).

According to Ricoeur, imagination provides the intermediary space for a shared “fantasy” for diverse things, such as a force that seems to be driven from behind, an attraction that seems to entice from the front, and reasons that seem to justify and stabilize it. In the form of imagination, the common element of “situation” is practically illustrated, demonstrating the distinction between a limiting physical cause on the one hand and a motivation and, on the other hand, between a motivation and a limiting logical factor (Ricoeur, 1991).

Social fantasy plays a fundamental role in depicting imaginary forms for society. In this regard, Husserl argues that in fantasy, it is not the case that an object first appears as a given actual object, which subsequently seems to be in contrast with something that appears in the field of attention as itself. What emerges in fantasy is immediately separated from what appears in perception. Thus, the conflict between the two is already ruled out. Unlike the awareness of images, what is presented in fantasy always disrupts the unity of the current field of perception from the beginning (Kortooms, 2002). The phenomenon of mentality is multifaceted; it has an internal aspect: individuality. Another aspect is intersubjective, meaning that each mentality relates to other mentalities. The third aspect is the relationship of mentality with the sacred; in each individual’s mentality, a sacred phenomenon exists, which can be religious, ethical, or customary. Finally, the aspect of mentality pertains to a person’s relationship with the world, meaning that mentality

is shaped in relation to the surrounding environment and the entirety of the world we live in (Khavar et al., 2020). The second and fourth dimensions of mentality, namely the relationship with other mentalities and the connection with the surrounding environment, fall within the realm of collective mentality, which influences political and social matters.

Imaginary is a mental phenomenon, a mental form or image that can be externalized from the mind and represented to society using various tools. This mental image undergoes five stages to transform into an imaginary concept. The first stage is the presence of imaginary forms in the mind. The second stage is a conjunction, where a person associates two images from those present in the imagination based on motivation, intention, and interests, establishing a connection and symmetry between them. In the third stage, the two imaginary forms that have become associated find a relational significance. The fourth stage involves emphasizing and amplifying the two imaginary forms in the predicate, such that other subject dimensions become smaller and smaller. The fifth stage is substitution and symbolism, where the predicate image replaces the subject image (Ghavamaleki and Nasakhian, 2018). By traversing these stages within collective mentality, social imaginary gains the power to bring about change and transformation in society, challenging the social order and establishing a new one. Social imaginaries, as a specific curvature of each social space, act as an invisible cement that holds together an endless array of real, rational, and symbolic goals that constitute each society, serving as a foundation that selects and shapes the fragments and pieces accepted in that context (society) (Castoriadis, 1998).

Therefore, social imagination creates a type of imaginary form through fantasy within society’s collective mentality. This imaginary has two aspects: one related to the past and the other to the future. The past aspect of social imaginary is rooted in shared history, myths, ideologies, stories, and narratives stored in society’s collective unconscious, surfacing at various times depending on circumstances. The aspect of the imagination related to the future delineates a utopia for society through fantasy, motivating the collective mentality toward achieving that ideal city. Social imaginary is shaped by the intertwining of myths and ideologies rooted in the past and fantasies and utopias that focus on the future, becoming the source of social changes and transformations.

A review of political developments during the first Pahlavi period

Iran’s strategic position, combined with the lack of a central government, led the Allies to occupy Iran during World War I despite its declaration of neutrality. In this context, various groups and forces emerged, further challenging the central government’s authority. Notable figures include Mohammad Khyabani in Azerbaijan, Sheikh Khazal in Khuzestan, Mirza Kuchak Khan Jangali in Gilan, Mohammad Taqi Khan Pesyan in Khorasan, Ismail Aqa Simitqu in Kurdistan, and Amir Afshar in Kermanshah. This situation created a kind of instability where social and political order and central authority were perceived as lost, prompting

some intellectuals and officials to grasp any opportunity to regain it. Sardar Sepah was not the most desirable but the most feasible option to establish a minimal order in the chaotic conditions of Iran following the fall of the Qajar dynasty. For this reason, some intellectuals wrote favorably about Reza Khan and harshly criticized the Qajars in the press. In 1302 (1923), members of the National Council proposed a plan calling for a change from a constitutional monarchy to a republic. The leading advocates of the Republic included intellectuals supportive of Reza Shah, such as Seyyed Mehdi Tadayyon, Sulayman Mirza Iskandari, and Ali Dashti.

In contrast, opponents included Mirzaadeh Eshqi, Seyyed Hasan Modarres, Malek al-Sho'ara Bahar, and Mirza Na'ini. In this struggle, the proponents of the Republic failed to win over the opponents, and their idea of creating a new form of government went nowhere. Eventually, on December 15, 1925, Reza Khan officially became Reza Shah in the Constituent Assembly and ruled Iran for 16 years.

Reza Shah implemented various reforms in military, educational, administrative, infrastructural, and economic fields during his reign. In the military sphere, he increased the armed forces from five divisions with 40,000 personnel to eighteen divisions with 127,000 personnel.

Reza Shah established the University of Tehran in 1934, and between 1925 and 1941, educational capacity increased twelvefold. He laid the foundations of a modern bureaucratic state, employing 90,000 full-time government employees across ten ministries: Interior, Foreign Affairs, Justice, Finance, Culture, Commerce, Post and Telegraph, Agriculture, Roads, and Industry. The volume of currency in circulation rose from 16 million rials in 1932 to over 1.74 billion rials by 1941. Workers in large factories increased from fewer than 1,000 in 1925 to over 50,000 in 1941. The number of new industrial units, excluding oil facilities, increased seventeenfold. Reza Shah completed the construction of the national railway in 1927. Highways expanded from 3,200 kilometers in 1925 to 20,000 kilometers in 1941 (Abrahamian, 2007). The capital of the National Bank of Iran grew from eight million rials in 1928 to three hundred million rials in 1935. Reza Shah's other actions were standardizing clothing and unveiling women. On January 7, 1935, the Shah and the Queen and princesses attended a celebration at the Teacher Training College. This was the royal family's first removal of their veils (Maki, 1983).

During Reza Shah's reign, severe restrictions were imposed on civil and political freedoms, affecting a range of groups from clergy to leftists, including even his ministers and state officials. Reza Shah announced his support for Islam at his coronation but soon adopted a different policy. A notable manifestation of this was the suppression of opposition to the unveiling of women at the Goharshad Mosque, where 400 to 500 people lost their lives, and many others were arrested and later executed. Another example of the oppressive atmosphere during Reza Shah's rule was the suppression of labor movements in the 1930s, during which he ordered the closure of unions, the arrest of their organizers, and close surveillance of gatherings of more than three

workers by the secret police. Leftist groups faced a similar fate; the Socialist Party of Sulayman Mirza Iskandar was dissolved, and their clubs were burned. About two thousand suspects of supporting the Communist Party were arrested. In 1938, a group of leftist Iranian intellectuals, known as the "Fifty-Three," led by Dr. Taqi Arani, were arrested and tried (Fouran, 2021).

Reza Shah's autocracy cast a shadow over all branches of government, and the sharp blade of his tyranny also affected his ministers and close associates. By 1933, the parliament had been reduced to a powerless tool in the hands of the government, and almost all of the Shah's initial advisors had been dismissed, exiled, imprisoned, killed, or completely subjugated. In that year, Teymur Tash, the Minister of Court, was arrested and subsequently killed in prison, and shortly after, Jafar Gholi Khan Sardar As'ad Bakhtiari, the Minister of War, met the same fate (Katouzian, 2001).

The suppression of social and political forces had turned Reza Shah into the sole ruler of the political arena, and unlike at the beginning of his reign, he no longer saw the need for the support of intellectuals and experienced officials. Reza Shah lacked a strong social base among the people and failed to keep political elites by his side; even the slightest spark could shatter the grandeur of his monarchy. Reza Pahlavi felt the absence of these forces when it was too late, as Allied forces had occupied the country. The occupation of Iran on September 4, 1941, faced no resistance from the people due to the despotism and repression that Reza Shah had created, and political figures capable of making an impact during this critical period were either killed or imprisoned. To preserve the monarchy within his family, Reza Shah had to turn to Mohammad Ali Foroughi once again. Ultimately, following negotiations, Reza Pahlavi abdicated, and his crown prince, Mohammad Reza, ascended to the throne, thus closing the chapter of his political life in the history of Iran.

The creators of the social imaginary

Different groups and patterns create the social imaginary and generate new semantic innovations. During the First Pahlavi Period, intellectuals and writers, clerics, and Reza Shah played a role in redefining new semantic fields of the state and constructing its image for the public.

Intellectuals

To understand the social mentality of the Iranian people in the years following the fall of the Qajar dynasty, we need to look further back and examine what happened to Iranians that led the form of government to evolve towards a personalist authoritarianism. The Iranian people, hoping to achieve their ideal utopia, initiated the Constitutional Revolution, established a parliament, wrote a constitution, and transformed the absolute monarchy into a constitutional one. However, all these efforts were thwarted when the parliament was shelled. Afterward, the country was plunged into civil war, and following numerous conflicts and events, what remained of the Constitutional Revolution was merely a superficial shell. The monarchy and military interventions hollowed out the parliament's effectiveness in each

period. This atmosphere of anomie and emotional defeat was vividly reflected in the works of the writers of this period.

The works of Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh, known as the father of Iranian short story writing, profoundly influenced society's thoughts and mentalities due to his fluent and straightforward prose. In his story *The Disillusionment of Farrokhi Yazdi with the Constitutional Revolution and its Outcomes* is expressed in the following verses: "Our incomplete revolution was evident indeed. If we saw the reverse result of the revolution."

In a qasida, Malek al-Shoara Bahar critiques Ahmad Shah Qajar's incompetence: "Hoping for rule from this ignorant king is like expecting a guard's watch from a thief. The indulgent king on the throne is akin to saddling a cow with golden trappings. A king seizes the land with a sword; There is no kingship in having a realm handed for free." (Bahar, 2008). Shafaq-e Sorkh published an article titled "Cyrus–Ahmad Shah: The Opera of History," stating: "The monarchy of Iran began with Cyrus the Achaemenid and, after two thousand and five hundred years, ended with Ahmad Shah Qajar."

Qanun, in its sharp criticism of Ahmad Shah's trip to Europe, wrote: Those who do not truly know the heartless, cowardly, and emotionless Shah of Iran, those who are still unaware that there are certain individuals who would prefer the beheaded head of the Queen of England over the Kianid crown, and would rather sell cabbages in Switzerland than guard their subjects in the heart of Asia, may have the right to think that certain hands have been at work to change the regime of Iran and facilitated the Shah's departure to Europe.

The disgust toward the Qajar dynasty and its last king, Ahmad Shah, was a central theme promoted by intellectuals and writers in books and the press. They portrayed the Qajar government as a dystopia or anti-utopia that had led society toward collapse and degeneration, emphasizing that it needed to be removed to reach the utopia. This ideal society stood in stark contrast to it.

Now, intellectuals had to outline a model of government that could replace the Qajar dynasty. Those intellectuals who had studied in the West were astonished by the progress they witnessed in those countries. Their prescription for remedying Iran's backwardness was to create a Renaissance in the Western style. Just as removing religion from politics had rescued the West from the Middle Ages, Iranian intellectuals sought a revival by eliminating the traces of religion from the intellectual and behavioral life of Iranians to enter the world of development. Their intellectual framework for achieving development was based on nationalist ideas. Seyyed Hassan Taqizadeh, the editor of *Kaveh* newspaper; Hossein Kazemzadeh, the editor of *Iranshahr* newspaper; Zabihe Behrooz, Sadegh Hedayat, Bozorg Alavi, Yaghma Jandghi, Mirzaadeh Eshqi, Farrokhi Yazdi, and Aref Qazvini were considered nationalist intellectuals, and the vision they presented for the government was founded on nationalism.

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Hossein Kazemzadeh writes in *Iranshahr* magazine: "Our nationality is Iranian identity, and Iranian identity is everything to us. We must first and foremost be Iranian, be called Iranian, and remain Iranian. Iranian identity is a sacred and comprehensive term encompassing all individuals of the Iranian nation without distinction of religion or language under its expansive shade." (Kazemzadeh, 1923). Mahmoud Afshar comments on the significance of nationalist ideas: "The inventors of the politics of nation-building aimed to create a sense of nationality that would unite all ethnic groups sharing a common language or ancestry, or those who have other commonalities, around a national center and forge them into a single nation." (Afshar, 1927).

Some intellectuals proposed "Republicanism" as a replacement for the Qajar dynasty and based their concept of government on this foundation. The newspaper *Setareh-ye Iran* published an article titled "Islam and Republicanism" in support of the Republic, emphasizing that this form of government does not conflict with the principles of Islam. It stated: "This constitutional system, parliament, organizations, and political institutions, etc., will continue to operate, and instead of a hereditary monarch, an individual who is a patriotic Muslim and elected by the nation will be chosen." (Setareh-ye Iran, 1924). Abul-Qasem Aref Qazvini praised the Republic in his poem: "It was by the strength of the people's will that from Zahak's grip, Kaveh, the blacksmith, liberated the hearts of the people. Whoever caused our country to become a ruin, May their house be rebuilt henceforth. By the hand of the Republic, whoever is the president, Let the winds of honor always blow in the eyes of noblemen."

However, many intellectuals did not seek their concept of government in Republicanism and opposed it. Seyyed Mohammad Reza Kordestani, using the pen name Mirzadeh Eshqi, wrote in the newspaper *Siasat* in the critique of Republicanism: "Do they even understand what a republic is? Is a republic something to eat? Something to wear? A translated article from the Turkish newspaper of the time, a few articles and poems, and a magazine from a conference of Ziya al-Wa'izin raising a few red flags, and... all of this should not be called a republic." (Kordestani, 1924).

Seyyed Ashraf al-Din Hosseini Gilani, the editor of the newspaper *Nasim-e Shomal*, wrote against Republicanism: "The Republic saddens the hearts of some representatives; the talk of the Republic has fallen in this land. Neither constitutionalism nor Republicanism will help me; I have only devoted my heart to the grace of the Lord of the Worlds." (Hosseini, 2013).

In fact, "Republicanism" was a schema that sparked a struggle among intellectuals between two different concepts of government. In this conflict, those intellectuals who opposed the Republic viewed this form of government not as an ideal utopia but even as a dystopia that was in no

alignment with the political system of Iran at that time. Conversely, the intellectuals who supported Republicanism were fewer in number compared to their opponents and were unable to instill their envisioned concept of government in the collective mentality of society.

Many writers and influential government figures envisioned a utopia centered on a centralized state capable of establishing security during that historical period. Most intellectuals and writers regarded Reza Khan as the embodiment of a strong and centralized government.

Ali Akbar Davar wrote in *Mard-e Azad* newspaper about establishing a strong central government: “We must either continue the struggle and factionalism, or we must all disband and submit to a powerful government that can make Iran prosperous, independent, and sustainable. If you prefer the second option, you must act quickly; our time is less than you think.” (Davar, 1923).

Ali Dashti wrote in *Shafaq-e Surkh* newspaper in praise of a strong central government: “The establishment of a strong and capable government that is also enlightened and virtuous, which can create modernity by the force of the bayonet, impose happiness, and effectively eliminate moral corruption, is the best way to achieve this goal.” (Dashti, 1924). Mohammad Mossadegh expressed his thoughts on the matter: “I am eager and inclined for the Prime Minister to be Reza Khan Pahlavi in this country to protect my home and my relatives. I am a person who desires security and peace in this land, and indeed, thanks to his presence, we have enjoyed these conditions over the past two or three years, and our time has been dedicated to the public good and the interests of the nation...” (Atabaki, 2006).

Therefore, the intellectuals’ concept of government during the Reza Shah era significantly impacted the collective mentality of society and the mindset of state officials and the Shah. In this historical period, we witnessed various schemas of government among intellectuals. What this group articulated about their disdain for the Qajar dynasty and Ahmad Shah in newspapers, notes, and books prepared the Iranian collective mindset for accepting a change in government to the extent that the fall of the Qajars and the loss of political power by this dynasty were met with no opposition, protest, or resistance from the people. The dystopia the intellectuals had depicted regarding the Qajars had permeated the collective consciousness of Iranians, who were now awaiting the creation of a new utopia. Now, intellectuals needed to outline this utopia for the people. Some intellectuals considered Republicanism an appropriate equivalent for the new government, and Reza Khan accepted and supported this idea. However, this Republicanism, conceived as a government intended to abolish the monarchy’s power and replace the king with a president, faced opposition from some intellectuals, such as Mirzadeh Eshqi and Seyyed Ashraf al-Din Hosseini Gilani. When the clergy also did not support this scheme, the realization of this form of government was annulled. Most intellectuals envisioned a centralized and powerful government due to the instability and chaos prevailing in the country. The historical dimension of the intellectuals’ concept of government was rooted in nationalist ideas, where the grandeur and glory of ancient

Iran had taken shape as a myth of the desired government in their political unconscious. The future dimension of their schema and utopia was establishing a strong and centralized government to achieve stable order and Western-style development. Thus, the intellectual consensus of figures like Foroughi, Timurtash, Kazemzadeh, Kasravi, Taghizadeh, Iraj Mirza, Aref Qazvini, Davar, and Moshfeq Kazemi formed around this concept of government, which they propagated in their newspapers, magazines, stories, and books, thereby influencing the collective mindset of Iranians and the social schema of government.

Clerics

At the end of the Qajar era and the beginning of the Pahlavi dynasty, clerics were not recognized as individuals with a political perspective on the country’s issues or considered active and knowledgeable. When they did intervene in political matters, it was primarily from a religious standpoint, and they did not hold a position beyond that. As previously mentioned, a group of intellectuals proposed the idea of “Republicanism” as a replacement for the Qajar government, which Reza Khan also supported. However, this proposal faced serious resistance from the clerics. The collective mindset of the clerics regarding the Republic was that it represented a form of government that would eliminate Islam from the political and social life of the Iranian people. This concern was articulated in a statement by the clerics of Tehran: “How can we accept that a clause of our Constitution be changed during this period, leading to further changes in future periods and the establishment of the demise of Islam in the parliament? If our consent is a condition, how can we accept that our votes be manipulated by tricksters, allowing them to bring any misfortune upon us?”. Modarres, in explaining his opposition to the Republic, stated: “I am not opposed to a genuine republic; however, the Republic they want to impose on us is not based on the will of the nation but rather is being imposed on the Iranian people by the British. They want to establish a regime in Iran that is completely subordinate to their authority. If the candidate for the Republic were a person who valued freedom and nationalism, I would certainly support him and would not withhold any assistance from him.” (Maki, 1980).

Sheikh Mohammad Khalisi Zadeh later explained his opposition to the Republic by saying: “I opposed the false Republic because Reza Khan intended to present himself as the absolute ruler of Iran under this title. I opposed him because I adhere to the Constitution, which established constitutionalism in Iran. Therefore, I remain loyal to constitutionalism out of respect for the Constitution. At that time, I was right; no one knows the future. I opposed that Republic because I envisioned it as a terrifying entity.” (Setareh, 1943). In the statements of the opponents of the Republic, it is explicitly mentioned: “The republicans intend to eradicate Shia Islam from this country. They aim to do the same thing their counterparts did in the Ottoman Empire. They abolished the caliphate in the name of the Republic and removed the turban from the heads of the clergy.”

Reza Khan sought support from constitutionalist clerics

for the Republic by meeting with Mirza Naini, Ayatollah Haeri Yazdi, and Ayatollah Seyyed Abolhassan Isfahani in Qom. Mehdi Haeri Yazdi recounts this meeting as follows: “My late father said that before Reza Khan came to our house, the three of us (Haeri, Naini, and Isfahani) decided to discuss the issue of kingship and the Republic with him. We all agreed to tell him that if you want to establish a dictatorship, then no. We are telling you from the beginning that we oppose you being the country’s ruler in any form of dictatorship, whether as president or as king. However, if you want to be a king, one that is merely a figurehead, we would agree to that.” (Lajevardi, 2002).

After this meeting, the religious authorities of Qom issued a statement: “Since certain statements have been made regarding the formation of the Republic that are not in the public interest and are incompatible with the needs of this country, we requested that during the visit of the esteemed Prime Minister to the holy city of Qom, he annul this title and the aforementioned statements, and announce it to all cities. He agreed.” (Mokhtari Isfahani, 2013). Events such as a Republican’s slap to Modarres in the parliament further damaged the clerics’ perception of the Republic, creating the impression that its dictatorial nature was becoming increasingly evident even before its establishment.

The mindset of the clerics at the time of the rise of the First Pahlavi Period was more religious than political. Some of them, like Modarres, considered constitutional monarchy desirable, while others refrained from engaging in political discussions. However, a significant portion of this group shared opposition to the Republic. One of the main reasons for this opposition was linked to the experience of the Gilan Republic, particularly Article 18 of the Gilan Movement’s manifesto, which caused considerable controversy. It stated: “Separation of the clergy from political and economic affairs”. The mental construct that the clerics had regarding this article was that the Gilan Republic was anti-Islam and anti-clergy; hence, when the Gilan movement was suppressed, there was no protest from this group. This experience had been deeply embedded in the political subconscious of the clerics, leading them to view “republic” as a form of government that would end in opposition to Islam. Thus, the historical dimension of their imagination was rooted in two forms of government: one being constitutional monarchy, which they viewed as less risky, and the other being the Gilan Republic, which revived their memories of conflict with the clergy and Islam. Consequently, they opposed it and ultimately felt that Reza Khan complied with their views.

Regarding the future dimension of the clerics’ imagination, there was no utopia or ideal city; it was sufficient for them that a form of government came to power that was not opposed to Islam and religion. This group, due to their presence in the lives of ordinary people, held significant influence over public perceptions of government. They managed to organize protest gatherings against the Republic, thereby affecting the social imagination of Iranians regarding the state.

Reza Shah Pahlavi

The imaginary that society holds about the state is shaped and crafted by social and political forces and rulers. During the fall of the Qajar dynasty and the rise of instability in Iran, Reza Khan himself was one of the significant forces shaping the imagination of the state. In an interview with the newspaper *Shafaq-e Sorkh*, Reza Shah describes his mindset about the state, its goals, and functions as follows: “My thoughts are focused on one thing: that Iran must be saved from its current humiliation and misery. This means establishing a government that is not subject to the political and economic ambitions of others and equipping the nation with all the essential elements for life and the happiness of nations in this era... To achieve this grand goal, I believe three things are necessary: Order, establishing security, and the concentration of the nation’s powers while eliminating the effects of lawlessness and rebellion. Second: Knowledge, which means equipping the people of the nation with the information that has led to the progress of civilized societies. Third: Strengthening the country’s economy...” (Dashti, 1923).

Reza Khan had no aristocratic lineage to rely on for his ascension to the throne; therefore, kingship was not an ideal form of government for him. On the other hand, Reza Khan had established his reputation through force and a coup, making it difficult for him to rely on the support of the people or civil parties and groups. He wanted to implement a new plan and create a form of government that differed from the past to define a new political identity for himself. The model of Atatürk’s Republic in Turkey represented an ideal type of government for Reza Khan, as it not only masked his lack of aristocratic lineage but also presented a new imaginary of the state, allowing him to see himself as the creator of this image in the collective consciousness of the people. However, as previously mentioned, he faced resistance from traditional forces and the clergy and eventually abandoned the idea of a republic.

Reza Shah’s mindset regarding the state was centered on the realization of Western development and the revival of ancient Iran’s glory. Intellectuals conveyed a significant portion of this imagination to him. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi describes his father’s nationalist inclinations as follows: “My father believed that Iranian civilization surpassed all other civilizations in every respect and viewed the glorious and honorable past of his homeland with admiration and reverence while also holding a strong interest in preserving ancient customs and traditions” (Pahlavi, 1968).

Reza Shah believed that the principles and values of ancient Iranian civilization could be aligned with those of Western civilization, and he formulated a plan for the country’s advancement based on this belief. He stated, “I am completely and unequivocally oriented toward new civilization, but I never wish to strip ancient Iran and its admirable legacies of their essence. My Iran, my sacred homeland, is one of those places that once served as a model for civilization. Under each of its ruins, there are signs that its glories are unforgettable and indelible for the Iranian generation and race.

Reza Shah’s mindset regarding the state was founded on

nationalism, Western development, and secularism, and his actions were structured around these three governance concepts. To promote nationalist tendencies, he undertook initiatives such as the coronation ceremony, the establishment of the Academy of Persian Language, holding events and celebrations to preserve the traditions of ancient Iran, founding the National Museum of Iran, constructing tombs for prominent Iranian poets such as Ferdowsi, Hafez, and Omar Khayyam, changing Arabic months to Persian and the lunar calendar to the solar calendar, revoking the privilege of discovering ancient artifacts, establishing the Organization for the Cultivation of Thoughts, and producing written histories such as “The Imperial History of His Majesty Reza Shah” by Abdullah Tahmasebi, “The Pahlavi Empire” by Nobakht, “The Pahlavi Dynasty” by Jafar Shahid, “The Thoughts of Great Reza Shah” by Fathollah Bina, “The History of the Sovereignty of His Majesty Reza Shah Pahlavi” by Saeed Nafisi, and “The Unity of the Iranian Nation” by Hossein-qoli Mo’idi. The idea of secularism during Reza Shah’s era was based on the perception that the glorious period of Iranian history predates the advent of Islam; therefore, to revive that magnificent and glorious era, Islamic symbols and rituals were removed from the realm of the state and society. Measures such as unveiling women, standardizing clothing, and prohibiting mourning ceremonies and passion plays were part of this effort. Reza Shah sought to reduce the backwardness and gap between Iran and Western countries by implementing initiatives such as nationwide road construction, reforming taxation and budgeting systems, establishing the first university in Iran, constructing the first airport, and expanding communication means, in order to transform Iran into a developed country.

Thus, Reza Shah’s concept of the state was founded on three pillars. The first image was his utopia of a state based on Western modernization, representing the future aspect of Reza Shah’s state ideology. The second image was ancient nationalism, which involved a return to the ideas of ancient Iran to create a native identity, forming the historical aspect of Reza Shah’s conception of the state. The third image was based on secularism and the separation of religion from the state.

Conclusion

In this article, we aimed to demonstrate that objective factors do not solely drive the formation of a state; rather, it is significantly influenced by mental constructs and social imaginaries. These imaginaries have multiple dimensions, with one aspect related to the past—such as myths, ideologies, the unconscious, and collective memory—and another encompassing utopias and fantasies directed toward the future. When these two dimensions of past and future imaginaries are intertwined within the collective consciousness, they can become a source of societal transformation and change. Social imaginaries are created through the influence of various social and political forces and groups. During the First Pahlavi Period, the creators of this imagination included intellectuals, writers, clerics, and Reza Shah himself. Following the fall of the Qajar dynasty, intellectuals sought to forge a new imaginary of the state that would fulfill their

aspirations. They believed that establishing this modern state required forming a national identity, after which discussions of a modern state could arise. To this end, they turned to the history of ancient Iran, positioning nationalism as the central theme of their imagination.

Next came the task of outlining an ideal form of government, with most intellectuals envisioning a modern Western state as their utopia. They gravitated towards a form of modern government, namely a republic, influenced by Western theories. Through magazines, newspapers, and social gatherings, they propagated this imaginary of the state and even garnered the attention of Reza Khan (Sardar Sepah) toward the idea of a republic. However, at this juncture, another group that influenced social imaginaries entered the scene and contested these ideas.

The clerics did not possess a specific imaginary of the state; they merely desired a government that would not conflict with Islam. Their political unconscious was shaped by experiences of Republicanism, particularly the temporary Republic of Gilan, which explicitly mentioned the separation of clerical authority from political affairs in its charter. Additionally, they were influenced by the anti-religious nature of socialist republics in other countries. At this time, the clerics did not have a utopia of statehood; they sought a government that, at the very least, would not oppose religion, similar to the constitutional monarchy. Ultimately, Reza Shah yielded and accepted the monarchy. He was heavily influenced by the intellectuals’ imagination of the state, and in the years following his accession, he pursued that same idea, albeit in an authoritarian manner. The past dimension of the intellectuals’ and Reza Shah’s imagination of the state was rooted in ancient Iranian civilization. This led to initiatives such as establishing the Academy of Persian Language, converting Arabic months to Persian, transitioning from the lunar to the solar calendar, and writing historical texts related to ancient Iran. The future dimension of their imaginary focused on Western development and progress, resulting in actions like the construction of nationwide roads, the unification of military forces and the establishment of an army, the formation of a modern bureaucracy, and educational and judicial reforms. One significant outcome of these transformations was the definition of a new imaginary of the state within the collective consciousness of Iranians. Whereas the primary duty of governance had previously been viewed solely as maintaining order and security, this period demonstrated that the state could have additional functions aimed at cultural, economic, judicial, and administrative development.

Authors contributions

Authors have contributed equally in preparing and writing the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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