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The Theory of Iran-Shahr: Genealogy, Components, and Conceptual Challenges

Abstract

The theory of Iran-Shahr is one of the most important conceptual frameworks for explaining the continuous historical identity of Iran. Although it has roots in the historical and political reality of ancient Iran, its modern theoretical formulation is mainly based on the works of Seyyed Javad Tabatabai (Tabatabai, 1379/2000). Using a descriptive-analytical approach, this article traces the origins of this idea from the Achaemenid period to the present day. It examines its main components—including the Persian language, the religious legitimacy of power, the bureaucratic system, and the literary-epic tradition. The article then analyzes the challenges this theory faces when confronting major historical breaks (such as the Islamic conquest, the Mongol period, and the Safavid revolution) and the requirements of the modern world (democracy, individual rights, and ethnic diversity). The conclusion is that Iran-Shahr is less a seamless, unbroken reality and more a narrative that has been repeatedly reproduced, reinterpreted, and sometimes reconstructed throughout history.

Keywords: Iran-Shahr, civilizational identity, historical continuity, divine glory (farr-e izadi), ancient wisdom, bureaucracy, Persian language, historical memory, modern nation-state, Safavid Shiism, historical essentialism

1. Introduction

One of the most fundamental questions in the study of Iranian intellectual history and national identity is this: What factors have allowed a vast land with great geographical size, ethnic diversity, and countless political ups and downs to maintain a sense of belonging and historical continuity among its people for thousands of years? In recent decades, the answer to this question has been formulated within a conceptual framework called the “Theory of Iran-Shahr.”

The term “Iran-Shahr” originally referred in Pahlavi sources to the territory under Sasanian rule (Daryaei, 1383/2004). However, what is known today in Iranian humanities as the “Theory of Iran-Shahr” is a relatively recent theoretical formulation, largely due to the intellectual efforts of

Seyyed Javad Tabatabai. He sought to explain the historical “decline” of Iran and to identify the roots of a shared historical self-awareness (Tabatabai, 1379/2000; Tabatabai, 1385/2006). In this theory, Iran-Shahr is not merely a past geographical-political reality. It is viewed as a comprehensive meaning system that has organized the individual, social, and political life of the people of the Iranian plateau for many centuries.

The purpose of this article is twofold: first, to reconstruct the internal logic of this theory and its key components; and second, to critically examine the challenges this framework faces when dealing with major historical breaks and the demands of the modern world.

2. What Is Iran-Shahr? A Conceptual Definition

Iran-Shahr can be defined as a civilizational idea—not a narrow ethnic identity or simply a geographical concept. More precisely, it is a meaning system that has created a shared political identity among the various ethnic groups and cultures living on the Iranian plateau. It has provided them with an answer to the basic question: “Who are we and how should we live?” (Tabatabai, 1385/2006).

An important point is that Iran-Shahr is not built on a single ethnicity. Unlike modern ethnic nationalisms, which define identity based on race, mother tongue, or a single homeland, Iran-Shahr has dealt from the beginning with the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the Iranian plateau. It has tried to create a kind of political-cultural unity within this diversity (Abrahamian, 1389/2010). For this reason, the theory should be placed more in the category of civilizational identity theories rather than ethnic nationalism theories.

From this perspective, the most fundamental achievement of the Iran-Shahr theory is explaining the transition of Iran from a collection of scattered units lacking a unifying center to a coherent civilizational whole. Before this process, the Iranian plateau was a collection of ethnic groups, languages, beliefs, and local power systems, each living somewhat independently without a shared center for defining identity and political legitimacy. What the Iran-Shahr theory claims to explain is how a unifying center—such as a common language, a religious-political legitimacy system, or a shared mythical memory—emerged. This center brought these scattered units together under a broader civilizational identity without necessarily erasing their local differences. In other words, Iran-Shahr should be understood as a narrative of the process of civilization-building—a process in which ethnic and territorial diversity, instead of leading to division or fragmentation, was reproduced and preserved for centuries within a shared meaning system.

Of course, as later sections will show, this transition did not happen all at once, without breaks, resistance, or periods of failure. This point must be separated from any extreme optimism about the uniformity and complete success of the process.

3. Historical Origins: From the Achaemenid Empire to the Sasanians

3.1. The Achaemenid Empire Model

Many researchers trace the first roots of this idea to the formation of the Achaemenid Empire. The Achaemenids were the first to establish a model of large-scale governance that created a comprehensive political order despite the wide ethnic diversity under their rule (Daryaei, 1383/2004). This first experience of statecraft provided the initial model for what later came to be called “Iran-Shahr.”

3.2. The Satrapy System and Management of Diversity

One of the important innovations of the Achaemenid political system was the satrapy system (local governorships). In this system, local rulers had relative freedom to manage their local affairs while remaining loyal to the central king. This model shows that from the very beginning, the idea of “unity without uniformity” was embedded in Iranian political thought: the effort to create a single political order without necessarily eliminating local ethnic, linguistic, and cultural differences.

3.3. The Sasanians and the Ideological Consolidation of Iran-Shahr

In the Sasanian period, this idea became more mature and established. By making Zoroastrianism the official state religion, the Sasanians created a strong link between religion and politics that provided ideological cohesion for the empire (Daryaei, 1383/2004). It was during this period that the concept of Iran-Shahr was officially used in Pahlavi texts, and a more centralized bureaucracy was formed to govern this territory.

4. The Legitimacy of Power in Ancient Iran

One of the main pillars of the ancient Iranian political system was how political power was legitimized. In this worldview, the king’s authority did not come from a social contract or popular election. It stemmed from cosmic order and divine will. The king was seen as the representative of Ahura Mazda on earth and the guardian of cosmic order (asha). This religious legitimacy was expressed through the concept of “farr-e izadi” (divine glory)—a symbolic and sacred halo that indicated the king’s divine selection for rule (Daryaei, 1383/2004).

This form of religious legitimacy had an important political function. Justice in this system was not an abstract legal principle but the king’s duty to maintain cosmic order and prevent chaos (the opposite of asha). This connection between religious legitimacy, justice, and cosmic order is one of the enduring elements of Iranian political thought. It continued after Islam, although in different forms (Motahhari, 1357/1978).

5. The Role of the Sasanians: Official Religion, Centralization, and Ideological Cohesion

The Sasanian period should be seen as the peak of institutional consolidation of Iran-Shahr. Three main factors contributed to the empire's ideological cohesion:

1. Making Zoroastrianism the official state religion, which provided a shared ethical-cosmological framework for all subjects.
2. Administrative centralization and the expansion of bureaucracy, which enabled more unified management of the vast empire.
3. The codification of court rituals and social class laws, which stabilized the social order (Tabatabai, 1379/2000).

However, these same factors that initially created cohesion later became causes of the Sasanian crisis. Severe class rigidity, increasing tax pressure, and exhausting wars with the Eastern Roman Empire had weakened the empire's foundations even before the Arab conquest (Tabatabai, 1379/2000).

6. The Islamic Conquest: Break or Continuity?

The Muslim Arab conquest in the seventh century CE is one of the greatest turning points in Iranian history. This event replaced the previous political legitimacy system (divine glory and Zoroastrian hierarchy) with a new system based on the Islamic Caliphate. This change can be seen as both an identity crisis and a fundamental political-religious break.

However, this break did not mean the complete erasure of the previous heritage. The Caliphate, needing to administer its vast territories, had no choice but to use the experienced Iranian bureaucracy. This led to a kind of cultural survival that continued through administrative institutions, language, and literature (Abrahamian, 1389/2010).

7. Preserving Iranian Identity After Islam: Language, Literature, and Cultural Memory

The important question is: How was Iranian identity preserved in the absence of an independent political institution? The main answer in research literature points to the central role of the Persian language, the literary tradition, and semi-independent local dynasties.

7.1. The Persian Language as Carrier of Historical Memory

The Persian language—especially New Persian, which developed after Islam—became the common language of elites, bureaucracy, and high literature across the Iranian plateau and beyond (Ahmadi, 1388/2009). By preserving and transmitting myths, epics, and a shared worldview, it provided a foundation for the continuity of historical memory, even in periods

without independent Iranian political power. Even non-Iranian dynasties such as the Seljuks, Ilkhanids, and Safavids kept Persian as the language of the court and high culture.

One unique feature of Persian is its remarkable historical continuity and stability compared to many other historical languages. From Rudaki to the present, Persian has preserved its continuity to a great extent. A modern Iranian can read thousand-year-old poems by Rudaki, Ferdowsi, Saadi, or Hafez without needing a dictionary. This linguistic continuity makes “live and direct access to historical memory” possible—an advantage that many other civilizations lack. It is one of the secrets of the survival of Iranian identity in the face of repeated conquests and political integrations. Without this language, Iran would probably have disappeared into larger empires like many other lands.

7.2. Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*: The National Epic

In this context, Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh* holds a special place. By collecting and versifying pre-Islamic myths and stories in Persian epic poetry, Ferdowsi created a work that is still recognized today as the national epic of Iranians. Its importance lies not only in its literary value but in its function as a reservoir of historical memory and a connector between generations of Iranians (Tabatabai, 1385/2006).

7.3. Local Dynasties

At the same time, the emergence of semi-independent Iranian dynasties such as the Samanids and Buyids in the third and fourth centuries AH played an important role in reproducing Iranian court symbols and customs within the new Islamic framework (Abrahamian, 1389/2010). These dynasties, while Muslim, consciously worked to revive the Persian language and Iranian court traditions.

8. The Islamic-Iranian Synthesis

What emerged afterward can be described as a cultural-political synthesis between Iranian and Islamic heritages. Concepts such as “justice,” which had roots in pre-Islamic political thought, were reinterpreted in the new Islamic framework. The Iranian bureaucracy, a Sasanian heritage, was put to work for Islamic governments (Motahhari, 1357/1978). This synthesis should not be seen merely as the hidden survival of an “Iranian spirit” under an Islamic shell. It was a dynamic and creative process of merging two different intellectual traditions, which led to a rich and original civilization in the Islamic Middle Ages.

9. The Safavid Period: A Turning Point in Identity

The Safavid period (10th–12th centuries AH / 16th–18th centuries CE) is one of the most important turning points in the reconstruction of Iranian identity. By making Twelver Shiism the official state religion, the Safavids drew a clear political-religious boundary between Iran and its

Sunni neighbors (especially the Ottoman Empire). For the first time in many centuries, this created a distinct political and religious identity for the Iranian territory that had not existed in this form before.

The widespread acceptance of Shiism among the Iranian people cannot be attributed only to a top-down political decision. Factors such as the emphasis on justice in Shiite teachings, the emotional-religious attachment of people to Imam Ali and the Prophet's family, and the compatibility of some Shiite elements with earlier Iranian cultural sensitivities played important roles (Motahhari, 1357/1978). Thus, modern Iranian identity can be seen as the result of the intersection of three elements: Shiism as the dominant religion, pre-Islamic ancient symbols and heritage, and the rich tradition of Persian culture and literature.

10. Main Components of the Iran-Shahr Theory: Analytical Summary

The most fundamental achievement of the Iran-Shahr theory is explaining Iran's transition from scattered units lacking a unifying center to a coherent civilizational whole.

From the historical review above, the main components of the Iran-Shahr theory can be summarized in several axes:

1. **Symbols and Myths:** These create collective memory, legitimize political power, and build emotional bonds between individuals and a larger shared identity.
2. **Ancient Iranian Wisdom:** It rested on two wings—theoretical and practical reason (thinking about cosmic order, justice, and good governance) and Zoroastrianism as a comprehensive meaning and ethical framework. Their combination created a coherent worldview in which political action always had religious-rational roots.
3. **Bureaucracy and State Institutions:** From the Achaemenid period to today, these have provided the administrative and legal framework needed to maintain social order and implement justice.
4. **Literature and Art:** Especially the Persian language and poetry, which have been the main carriers of historical memory and cultural identity.
5. **Historical Flexibility:** The ability of this meaning system to absorb, reinterpret, and synthesize new elements (such as Islam and Shiism) without completely losing continuity with the past.

The importance of symbols should not be underestimated. Symbols such as divine glory, the *Shahnameh*, and later Shiite symbols were not merely decorative cultural elements. They were main tools for political legitimization and creating emotional bonds between people and the political system. In the absence of modern participatory institutions, they played a central role in social cohesion.

11. Critique and Theoretical Challenges

Despite the explanatory power of this framework, the Iran-Shahr theory has faced serious criticisms in recent decades from historians and political sociologists.

11.1. Elite-Centered and Selective History

The first criticism is that this theory is mainly based on texts and evidence left by the court, bureaucratic elites, and clerics. It shows little reflection of the lived experience of ordinary people—peasants, artisans, and marginal ethnic groups. Extending the “historical self-awareness” of elites to the entire society is considered a selective historiography that marginalizes large segments of the historical Iranian population (Nikfar, 1394/2015).

11.2. Conflict with Modern World Principles

The second fundamental challenge is the conflict between the sacred legitimacy logic of the traditional Iran-Shahr system and the principles of modern governance. Democracy, popular sovereignty, and individual rights—which form the pillars of the modern state—are based on social contract and citizens’ consent, not divine or dynastic legitimacy. Any direct attempt to derive today’s governance model from the mythical heritage of divine glory fundamentally conflicts with modern legal principles (Ahmadi, 1388/2009).

11.3. The Danger of Historical Essentialism

The third and perhaps most important methodological criticism is the risk of “historical essentialism”—the assumption that a fixed “spirit” or “essence” of Iran has continued unchanged from ancient times to the present. In recent historiography, collective identities are not fixed essences but historically constructed and fluid entities that are constantly redefined in the context of economic, political, and social changes (Nikfar, 1394/2015). Major historical breaks—the Arab conquest, the Mongol invasion, the Safavid religious revolution—show that what “Iran” meant in each period had fundamental differences from other periods. Referring to all these periods as stemming from one fixed root is historical oversimplification.

11.4. Confusing Traditional Order with the Modern Nation-State

A fourth criticism, perhaps more fundamental, concerns how some interpreters of the Iran-Shahr theory approach the modern nation-state. Many versions try to draw a direct parallel between the Iran-Shahr political order and the modern nation-state, as if Iran-Shahr was a precursor or early

seed of today's nation-state. This comparison, even if intended to show Iran's historical "progressiveness" or "authenticity," is methodologically incorrect and misleading.

The Iran-Shahr order, despite some superficial similarities to modern state functions (such as bureaucracy, taxation, or rule over a defined territory), fundamentally belongs to the traditional world. It was based on sacred legitimacy, personal-dynastic loyalty, and fixed social hierarchy—not on social contract, equal citizenship, or rule of law. Comparing these two orders commits two errors at once: it reduces tradition by ignoring its internal logic and presenting it as an incomplete or primitive version of modernity, and it reduces modernity by detaching the modern nation-state from its specific historical-legal context (modern revolutions, social contract, citizen rights) and reducing it to a merely administrative or territorial form that could exist in any historical period, including antiquity.

To clarify this distinction, the two orders can be contrasted as follows:

Aspect	Iran-Shahr	Modern Nation-State
Nature	Comprehensive meaning system	Legal-political structure with clear borders
Basis of Legitimacy	Deep historical-cultural and religious identity	Constitution and citizenship
Origin	Historical and organic	Constructed and contractual
Principle of Unity	Shared language, myth, and religious order	National sovereignty and public will

The key point is that today's Iran benefits from the Iran-Shahr heritage but is itself a modern state. Iran-Shahr in its precise historical sense cannot be revived, but without attention to it, modern Iranian identity would lack depth and historical foundation. The better approach is to explain the Iran-Shahr order within the specific conditions of Iran in its own time—considering the motivations, capacities, and tools available to rulers of that era—rather than borrowing modern state concepts to judge or beautify the past.

11.5. Limitations of Historical Evidence and the Line Between Fact and Speculation

The fifth criticism concerns the quality and quantity of evidence on which claims about Iran-Shahr are based. Presenting Iran-Shahr as a uniform, obstacle-free, and necessarily successful phenomenon throughout history owes more to optimistic historiography than to solid historical evidence.

The truth is that reliable written records from many periods under discussion—especially ancient times—are very limited, scattered, and subject to error and distortion. Much of what is said today about the political structure, religious legitimacy, or ideological cohesion of ancient Iran-Shahr is not based on definitive written documents but on interpretations of archaeological findings. These findings are themselves open to different readings and ultimately remain in the realm of scientific conjecture rather than proven fact. This limitation of evidence requires that any definitive claims about the degree of realization, uniformity, or historical success of Iran-Shahr be made with great methodological caution.

11.6. Summary of Criticisms: Need for a Realistic Approach, Not Denial

Emphasizing these criticisms does not mean denying the phenomenon of Iran-Shahr or invalidating the entire theoretical framework. What these criticisms demand is a shift from a celebratory and biased approach to a realistic, cautious, and methodical one—one that is aware of the limitations of available historical evidence and avoids inappropriate comparisons between the concepts and standards of two different worlds: tradition and modernity.

12. Global Importance of This Discussion: Beyond the Iranian Case

The questions addressed by the Iran-Shahr theory are not unique to Iran. In today's world, facing massive migration, multicultural societies, and identity crises, the question of how to create political-social unity within cultural and ethnic diversity is a global one. Iran's historical experience—with all its shortcomings—offers a noteworthy example of a long-term effort to create “unity without uniformity.” It can provide both positive and cautionary lessons for today's pluralistic societies.

13. Conclusion

The Iran-Shahr theory, while providing a valuable conceptual tool for understanding the cultural, institutional, and linguistic continuities in Iranian history, should not become an uncritical, essentialist narrative. Iranian history must be examined simultaneously through elements of continuity (Persian language, bureaucracy, legitimacy symbols) and elements of rupture (conquests, religious transformations, socio-economic changes). We must also avoid two other methodological errors: first, the inappropriate comparison of the traditional Iran-Shahr order with the modern nation-state, which reduces both tradition and modernity and empties each of its internal logic; and second, portraying Iran-Shahr as a uniform, obstacle-free, and necessarily successful phenomenon, while the severe limitations of written historical evidence and heavy reliance on archaeological interpretations require that many of these claims remain in the realm of scientific conjecture rather than established fact.

The final lesson of this discussion is that collective identities, including Iranian identity, are not frozen, pre-determined realities but living narratives that are constantly being reconstructed. In each generation, they are reread and redefined in light of tradition and the demands of the modern world. One of the most important issues that has received less attention is the gradual weakening of the Iranian rationality system—both theoretical and practical—over the centuries. The very “ancient wisdom” that was one of the pillars of Iran-Shahr became passive in the face of modernity and could not prepare Iran for an active and creative engagement with the new world. Rebuilding this rationality requires an honest examination of Iran itself: a deep understanding of the past not for celebration, but for critiquing mistakes and understanding the roots of historical weaknesses. In this sense, the Persian language and literature have preserved both the glory and the suffering and failures of Iran. They can serve as an essential key for unlocking the past and theorizing about the future. The challenge facing contemporary Iran is exactly this: how to benefit from this rich historical heritage without ignoring the requirements of inclusive institutions, equal citizenship rights, and modern rule of law.

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Note: This article was prepared based on a presentation delivered at the International Conference on Iranian-Islamic Civilization: Identity, Components, and Historical Splendor (Vienna, Austria, February 2026).

