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A Brief Review of the History and Structure of Social Security in Iran

Abstract

Social security, and old-age protection as one of its components, are key concerns for governments shaped by demographic ageing and economic pressures. The situation is further complicated by institutional fragmentation. This paper traces the historical evolution of Iranian social security, highlighting provisions for old-age pensions, demonstrating that the system operates through 18 active pension funds, each with its own legal framework, contribution rates, and benefit calculation formulas. Such fragmentation generates inequalities in retirement income, while inflation, demographic shifts and governance ambiguities further threaten sustainability. The study, primarily based on national documents and reviews, concludes that Iran's pension system remains structurally vulnerable, requiring coherent reforms to ensure fairness, transparency and long-term financial viability.

Keywords: social security, pension protection, pension funds, Iran
JEL Classification: G22, G23, H53, H55, J32

Introduction

Pension systems are fundamental pillars of modern welfare states, protecting individuals against risks that leave them vulnerable, including those associated with old age, disability and poor health. In the Islamic Republic of Iran (hereafter Iran), institutions providing such protection have undergone a long process of development, ranging from early precedents in ancient Persia to the establishment of complex statutory frameworks in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Currently, although such arrangements have sought to embody principles of social solidarity and protection, they are characterised by institutional fragmentation, an inconsistent regulatory framework, and significant disparities in benefit provision.

The primary motivation for this study arises from the mounting pressures that undermine the adequacy and sustainability of Iran's pension system. Persistently high inflation, a pronounced demographic transition marked by rapid population ageing and declining fertility rates, and the financial strain associated with Pay-As-You-Go (PAYG) financing mechanisms collectively raise concerns regarding equity and fiscal resilience, while at the same time, the coexistence of overlapping legislation and ambiguous governance structures undermines transparency, consistency and public confidence. These dynamics place Iran's arrangements at the centre of debates that are also featured in the international literature, particularly with regard to principles articulated by the OECD and the International Labour Organisation concerning financial sustainability, equity and universal coverage.

By reviewing current laws and regulations, national analyses and reports, as well as literature on pension funds and social security systems, this article examines the evolution, institutional design and contemporary challenges of Iran's pension system. It puts forward the thesis that despite the formal entrenchment of social protection within Iranian law and policy, systemic incoherence and socio-economic transformations undermine their long-term viability. The objectives are threefold: first, to trace the historical development of pension policy; second, to analyse the institutional and financial structures of current pension funds; and third, to examine the challenges threatening the system.

Delve into history

The industrial era profoundly shaped the development of old-age protection, resulting both from the shifting role of families as primary caregivers and from the evolving needs of the labour market. An example of this transformation is Bismarck's 19th-century efforts to secure the German monarchy [Flora, Alber, 1981; Kerr, Harbison, Dunlop, Myers, 1960; Wilensky, 1974; Schmidt, 2005, cited in Grünewald, 2021, p. 100]. Today, such provisions are typically viewed as a governmental duty and a civil-rights measure, though interpretations range from social-stability instruments to humanitarian obligations.

In Iran, the authorities have long sought to provide social security with policies reflecting either gratitude toward the population or efforts to modernise society along the lines of European countries. Even ancient Persia anticipated such provisions: emperors ensured workers – including those involved in the construction of Parseh – received rations based on status, role, training, type of work [Wiesehofer, 2001, p. 73] and age [Koch, 1992, cited in Hassani, 2007], with additional support for those earning the minimum wage [Wiesehofer, 2001, p. 70]. Compensation included "difficulty of occupation" and "illness" allowances, state-funded "royal donations", and annual distributions [Koch, 1992, cited in Hassani, 2007]. Mothers, especially of sons, received special allowances and could work part-time without loss of pay [Wiesehofer, 2001, p. 88; Koch, 1992, cited in Hassani, 2007], representing an early form of support for working women's rights and a social incentive for childbirth [Brosius, 1996, cited in Hassani, 2007].

Social welfare for workers extended beyond active employment, with one-eighth of wages set aside to provide for age or illness [Salek Zoqi, Taheri Kholous, 2021, p. 44]. However, social upheavals, invasions and wars transformed protection systems and economic structures, with support for male labourers reinstated faster than that for women. During these transitions, families primarily cared for vulnerable members, supplemented by broader community charity [Amani, 2021a; Amani, 2021b; Amani, 2021c]. Figure 1 illustrates the key moments when governing bodies enacted significant regulations in favour of social security. As mentioned earlier, the earliest evidence of social protection in Iran dates back to the Achaemenid Empire, while over successive dynasties, various further forms of social support emerged. However, the first formal and relatively modern framework appeared during the Qajar era (1789–1925), alongside the early sessions of the National Consultative Assembly. The "Pensioners Act" (see Table 1) was among the earliest legislative acts, providing support for the dependents of deceased government employees.

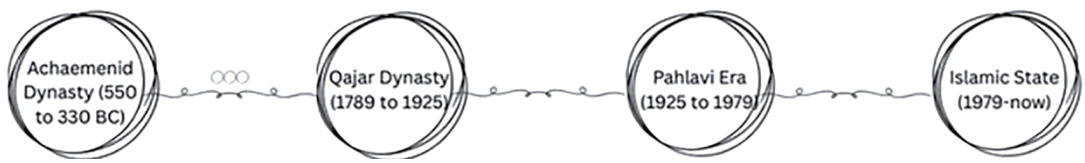
Given the close link between pensions and the labour market, it was vital to establish a clear legal framework to safeguard the elderly or people with disabilities. Accordingly, several laws were enacted during the Qajar and Pahlavi periods, and the legislation of these eras, particularly under the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979), marks the foundation of Iran's modern system of social protection, social security, and retirement regulations.

Following the 1979 transition from a monarchy to the Islamic Republic, most labour and welfare laws remained in force, though reforms were introduced to improve provisions, expand coverage, and align them with international standards. For example, both the Civil Service Law and the Social Security Law originated before the Islamic Republic, but have since been amended to reflect socio-economic developments. As shown in Table 1, the Civil Service Law, covering state employees, was first enacted in 1922 and subsequently amended in 1930 and 1992, before and after the political transformation.

Greater emphasis on religious principles promoting social justice, material welfare and human dignity within the Islamic framework further reinforced labour protection and broadened the scope of social security. This influence is evident in the legislative focus of the period, which prioritised worker protection. Moreover, Islamic teachings have significantly shaped Iran's socio-economic structure, leading the state to view itself as primarily responsible for ensuring social security and pensions. Although Islamic doctrine recognises private property, it is not upheld to the same extent as in liberal or capitalist societies, with the state retaining a central role in overseeing pensions and social security rather than delegating these functions entirely to the private sector. As discussed later, all Iranian pension funds remain, to some extent, linked to the government, even when operating under private names.

Table 1 presents the corresponding time points for major labour-related regulations in Iran.

Figure 1. Dynasties and the evolution of social security laws over time



Source: own material.

Table 1. Time points for major labour-related regulations in Iran

Year	Law
1908	Pensioners Act
1922	Civil Service Law (amended in 1930 and 1992)
1975	Social Security Law
1988	Direct Taxation Law (excludes retirees)
1990	The Labour Law
2004	Comprehensive Welfare and Social Security System Structure Act
2007	The Civil Service Management Law
2017	Permanent Provisions of the Development Plans Act
2022	General Policies of The Social Security System

Source: own material.

Social security in Iran

Generally speaking, social security in Iran encompasses a range of protections, including support for old age (pensions), healthcare, disability benefits, and maternity leave benefits (pregnancy) [Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran, 1975, Art. 3; Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran, 2004, Art. 1]. This study, however, focuses specifically on the pension system and its associated funds.

Pension coverage

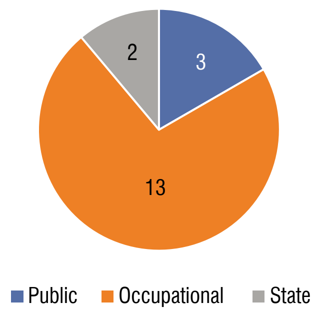
The provision of old-age pensions in Iran is legally mandated for entities operating within the social security system. Such pensions are granted to employees of both individuals and organisations, including the self-employed [Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran, 2004, Art. 3(d)], provided that they have paid contributions to a recognised fund. Coverage extends beyond standard retirement to include early retirement, disability and related circumstances, with benefit levels determined according to fund-specific regulations. Early retirement is subject to strict eligibility criteria, whereby either the employee or the employer may apply for it following a defined contribution period [Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran, 1975, Art. 78], although penalties may apply. In contrast, disability benefits are typically more generous, although they vary depending on whether the condition is work-related and on its severity.

The pension systems administered by Iranian pension funds are primarily based on Defined Benefit (DB) schemes, fully or partially funded [Bazr Afkan, Gomari, 2019, p. 11], although some scholars argue that the system in practice operates on an unfunded Pay-As-You-Go (PAYG) system [Parvandi, Belbasi, 2020, pp. 105–106; Mir, Ganjian, Forouhesh Tehrani, 2014, p. 117; Adabi Firouzjaee, Karimi, 2018, pp. 63–64]. Although the main goal of these funds is the provision of old-age support, they differ in terms of retirement eligibility, regulatory frameworks, and contribution rates. Contributions are calculated as a fixed percentage of pensionable earnings, mirroring the Bismarckian model. Regarding pension formulas, variations exist among funds; however, most apply calculations based on the average pensionable earnings from the last 24 months of employment, multiplied by the years of contributions, divided by 30 [Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran, 1975, Art. 77; Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran, 1922, Art. 78; Golab, 2024, pp. 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24].

In PAYG systems, contributions from active members are used to finance the benefits of inactive members, which aligns with the definitions provided by Hemming [1999, pp. 5, 9], Kit [2015, p. 1], and Igazné Prónai [2006, cited in Szabó, 2024, p. 201]. However, as Mozayani and Alizadeh Haspastan and Golab argue, Iranian pension funds have established investment portfolios, secured bank credits, and engaged in asset management to strengthen their financial base [Mozayani, Alizadeh Haspastan, 2020, p. 15; Golab, 2024, pp. 15, 17, 19, 21]. It is worth noting that sustaining a PAYG system may necessitate increased contribution rates over time. In the Iranian context, pension and salary adjustments are determined annually by the government to maintain purchasing power, with increases in both pensions and wages closely aligned in recent years.

In terms of a broader range of services, pension funds are responsible for providing adequate protection against retirement, disability and occupational accidents, although they are not uniformly required to provide medical services or reimburse healthcare costs. Consequently, they may be classified as specialised social security providers operating under the name of "pension funds". Their establishment may be approved by governing bodies such as the Parliament, the Council of Ministers, or through internal organisational approval [Golab, 2024, p. 9]. Figure 2 illustrates the number of active pension funds in Iran and their respective institutional affiliation.

Figure 2. Number and affiliation of active pension funds in Iran



Source: own material.

The benefits available to insured persons vary according to the financial capacity and budgetary constraints of each institution [Momeni, 2024, p. 13]. These institutions are presented in Table 2. According to Masumi [2024, p. 487], Iran's social security system is characterised by uncertainty regarding the legal status of certain pension funds, particularly in relation to whether they fall within governmental, private or public non-governmental organisations. This ambiguity stems from the absence of a coherent regulatory framework and the coexistence of multiple laws with contradictory provisions on pension schemes governance [Masoumi, 2021, p. 425]. In practice, Iranian pension funds are regulated and managed by a range of unions and institutions, primarily executive bodies, which operate under higher-level directives alongside their own distinct legal and regulatory frameworks [Momeni, 2024, p. 13].

Table 2. Iranian pension funds: their legal nature and entity

#	Fund	Legal nature of the fund	Legal entity of the fund	Notes
1	Social Security Organisation (SSO)	non-governmental public	legal personality and financial independence of the Ministry of Welfare and Social Security	members are workers and employees of private and chosen public entities
2	Farmers, Villagers, and Tribes Social Insurance Fund (FVTSIF)	non-governmental public	independent legal, financial and administrative personality under the supervision and overall leadership of the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour and Social Welfare	designated to rural and urban regions with a population of less than 20 000
3	Civil Servants Pension Fund (CSPF)	governmental	independent legal, financial and administrative personality affiliated with the SSO	members are government employees (primarily teachers, university professors and judges)
4	Armed Forces Social Security Organisation (SATA)	governmental	legal personality, and financial and administrative independence, affiliated with the Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces Support	

#	Fund	Legal nature of the fund	Legal entity of the fund	Notes
5	Ministry of Intelligence Pension Fund	governmental	independent legal entity affiliated with the Ministry of Intelligence	
6	Iranian Steel Pension Fund (IRSBF)	occupational	no data	
7	Oil Industry Pension Fund (OIPF)	occupational	independent legal, financial and administrative personality	
8	Iranian Central Bank Pension Fund	occupational	no data	
9	Central Insurance Employees' Pension Fund	occupational	no data	
10	*Iran* Insurance Company Employees' Pension Fund	occupational	no data	
11	Pension Fund of Port and Shipping Organisation Employees	occupational	no data	
12	Tehran Municipality Pension Fund	occupational	no data	
13	National Iranian Air Line Pension Fund	occupational	no data	
14	National Iranian Copper Industries Company Pension Fund (SBSMES)	occupational	non-profit institution with legal personality, and financial and administrative independence	
15	Pension Fund for the Islamic Republic of Iran Radio and Television	occupational	no data	
16	Bank Employees' Pension Fund	occupational	no data	
17	Ayandeh-Saz Pension Fund	occupational	non-governmental organisation with legal personality, and financial and administrative independence, under the supervision and leadership of the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour and Social Welfare	
18	Lawyers and Legal Professionals' Fund	occupational	legal personality, and financial and administrative independence	

Source: Momeni [2024, p. 10], Bazr Afkan, Gomari [2019, p. 7], and own material.

Occupational pension funds are typically organised within specific institutions [Momeni, 2024, p. 12] and generally cover employees from their affiliated industries who have formal employment contracts. If an employer does not recognise a person as official staff, responsibility for providing social support is transferred to the Social Security Organisation (SSO). Under the Civil Service Management Law, employees are required to join a single pension plan upon their first contribution; dual participation is prohibited, although supplementary life insurance may be purchased. Private-sector employees are not permitted to participate in government-designated schemes. However, those eligible for membership in either the

Civil Servants Pension Fund (CSPF) or the SSO may join any fund willing to accept them. Furthermore, employees are entitled to change their pension fund once during the course of their career [Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran, 2007, Arts. 101–102]. In both cases, employers are mandated by law to enrol their employees.

Articles 1 and 3 of the *Comprehensive Welfare and Social Security System Structure Act* [Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran, 2004] state that participation in protection schemes is mandatory, and employees are generally informed in advance of the pension fund to which they will be assigned. Membership in a particular fund may be explicitly specified in the employment contract, although this is not universally applied. Contribution rates are determined on the basis of the employee's pensionable earnings [Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran, 2007, Art. 106; Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran, 1975, Art. 28], and encompass most categories recognised as social security by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Table 3 presents the total contribution rate imposed by each pension fund.

Table 3. Contribution rates of each pension fund (in %)

#	Fund	Employee's share	Employer's share	Government's share	Total
1	SSO	7	20+3+4	3	33–37
2	FVTSIF	5		10	15
3	CSPF	9	13.5	deficit financing	22.5
4	SATA	9	13.5	deficit financing	22.5
5	Ministry of Intelligence Pension Fund	10	15		25
6	IRSBF	10	20		30
7	OIPF	6	19		25
8	Iranian Central Bank Pension Fund	8.5	27		25.5
9	Central Insurance Employees' Pension Fund	9	18		27
10	*Iran* Insurance Company Employees' Pension Fund	9	18		27
11	Pension Fund of Port and Shipping Organisation Employees	9	13.5		22.5
12	Tehran Municipality Pension Fund	7	14		21
13	National Iranian Air Line Pension Fund	7	14		21
14	SBSMES	10	20		30
15	Pension Fund for the Islamic Republic of Iran Radio and Television	8	16		24
16	Bank Employees' Pension Fund	9	21		30
17	Ayandeh-Saz Pension Fund	7	19		26
18	Lawyers and Legal Professionals' Fund	8	4		12

Source: Bazr Afkan, Gomari [2019, pp. 12–13].

Contributions paid by fund members may extend beyond pension coverage, depending on the nature of the coverage offered [Golab, 2024, p. 27]. For instance, the contribution rate for the SSO includes not only retirement benefits but also health insurance [Momeni, 2024,

p. 30], unemployment insurance (3%, covered by the employer), and compensation for work in arduous and hazardous occupations (4%, also covered by the employer) [Bazr Afkan, Gomari, 2019, pp. 8, 9, 11]. In contrast, the contributions of members of the Oil Industry Pension Fund (OIPF) are allocated exclusively to pensions, with medical expenses covered directly by the employer [Momeni, 2024, p. 160].

In some cases, contributions may continue after retirement, particularly with regard to health and medical services. The SSO and the CSPF operate within this framework, with retirees remaining responsible for insurance premiums. Under Iran's *Social Security Law*, retired and disabled individuals, their immediate family members, and beneficiaries of survivors' pensions are entitled to medical services, provided that they contribute 2% of their pensions. The gap between this contribution and the actual cost of medical services is met by the SSO [Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran, 1975, Art. 89].

Overall, taking into account the enacted laws, regulations and the frameworks within which pension funds operate, the Iranian retirement and pension system appears to function through a decentralised yet coordinated structure. The regulations delineate the system's boundaries and strategies, while simultaneously facilitating the establishment of institutions that strengthen its functioning as complementary pillars [Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran, 2017, Art. 3].

Challenges

Given the differences in legal frameworks and regulations across pension funds, alongside the ongoing social and economic transformations in Iranian society, it is reasonable to question whether the system adequately ensures member satisfaction. Drawing a definitive conclusion is challenging, as the relationship between members, funds and the government is shaped by their distinct roles and respective impacts on the system.

Members

Under national legislation, all employment contracts require employees to participate in one of the established pension funds. Contributions are deducted from salaries at a fixed rate, with entitlements to retirement benefits determined accordingly. Pension benefits are typically calculated using fund-specific formulas, most often based on the average salary from the final two years of employment, the total contribution period, and the relevant accrual rate. To maintain purchasing power and reduce the risk of poverty in retirement, pensions are generally indexed to inflation through annual adjustments [Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran, 1975, Art. 96; Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran, 2007, Art. 76].

From a theoretical perspective, and in line with actuarial principles, this framework aims to guarantee employees a secure pension income. However, increasing economic pressure, particularly persistent inflation, has in recent years raised concerns regarding the adequacy and fairness of pension payments [Negahdari,[1] 2023; Torkashvand,[2] 2024; Soltani Kia,[3] 2025].

Funds

A review of Iran's current legislation on pensions, social protection, and social security suggests that while the principles identified by the OECD (2023) are broadly reflected in practice, the system does not function entirely as described by Duran (2018), but has instead developed its own distinctive approaches. Pension funds act as the primary insurers; however, complementary schemes are still lacking, despite the availability of annuity plans sold by life insurers. In essence, these funds function as intermediaries, pooling contributions and investing them in financial markets.

According to Golab [2024, pp. 27–30], the diversification of responsibilities and governance has increased their vulnerability to political, social and economic fluctuations. They are widely viewed as the main providers of social security, with elements of state governance embedded in their management structures. Nevertheless, with the exception of the SSO and Ayandeh-Saz fund, most function as employee-based entities, which has generated significant challenges in balancing assets and liabilities. Occupational pension funds, moreover, encounter the same global challenges faced by similar institutions internationally. Organisations such as the ILO and ISSA highlight the importance of integrated pension systems and the principle of equal treatment. In Iran, however, inconsistencies across pension fund regulations have created disparities among retirees, and legal and operational barriers hinder the transfer of pension records between schemes. The dominance of the SSO further weakens the bargaining power of occupational funds, thereby undermining their financial resilience. Transparency is also limited, with access to information particularly restricted for occupational funds, many of which do not meet established transparency standards. Divergences in regulation exacerbate this issue, as some funds operate under bespoke rules while simultaneously adhering to broader legislation in areas such as pension adjustment.

Finally, factors such as a low support ratio and weak social acceptance place pension funds precariously with respect to paying pensions and providing services to the elderly. As Table 4 shows, the coverage ratio in most of the funds analysed is below one, reflecting the vulnerability of these institutions in sustaining the principles of a PAYG system and in securing adequate financing and social protection for their members.

[1] Head of the Parliament Research Center.
[2] Executive Secretary of the Workers' House of Shahr-e Rey.
[3] President of the Supreme Association of Retired Employees Covered by Social Security Law.

Table 4. Support ratio in chosen pension funds

#	Fund	Year	Support ratio
1	Ayandeh-Saz Pension Fund	2020	1.6
2	Iranian Steel Pension Fund	2021	0.05
3	Tehran Municipality Pension Fund	2021	1
4	Bank Employees' Pension Fund	2021	0.83
5	Oil Industry Pension Fund	2022	0.97
6	National Iranian Copper Industries Company Pension Fund	2022	0.56
7	Civil Servants Pension Fund	2023	0.48
8	Lawyers And Legal Professionals' Fund	2019	28.7
9	Pension Fund of Port and Shipping Organisation Employees	2023	0.59

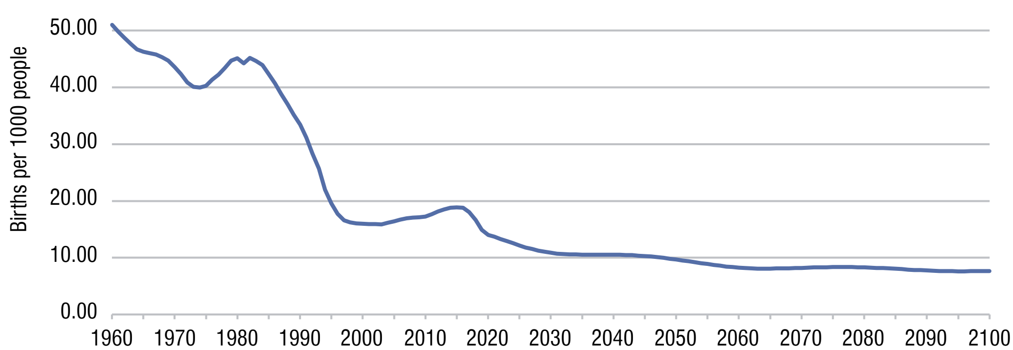
Source: Golab [2024, pp. 24, 26]; Qasemi Siyani [2024, p. 2].

Government

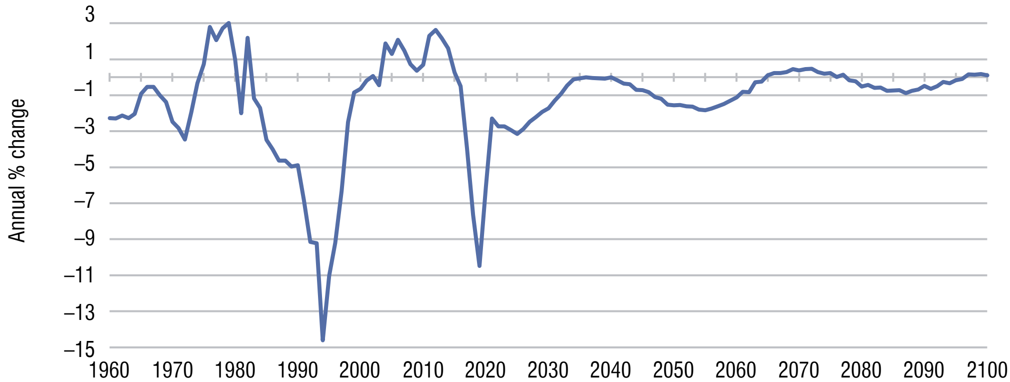
Research institutions and parliamentary representatives have sought to analyse emerging challenges and introduce legislation aimed at expanding social security provisions. These initiatives indicate that policymakers are aware of the serious consequences of failing to establish an effective social protection framework. Nevertheless, one of the main factors limiting the government's ability to meet public expectations is the combined impact of demographic and economic transformations.

Given the simultaneous maturity and transitional phase of Iranian pension funds, financing these schemes has become increasingly problematic. Among the most pressing social issues currently facing governments – and likely to persist in the future – are changes in the age structure of Iranian society. As shown in Figure 3, the dominant trend has been a sustained decline in the number of newborns. This demographic shift is of particular concern, since the Iranian social security system is financially dependent on contributions from future generations due to its declared PAYG structure. Consequently, the long-term sustainability of the system may be at risk, and the government is drawn into a complex dilemma, reflecting its dual responsibility to address both current needs and future obligations.

Figure 3. Iran's birth rate from 1960 to 2100



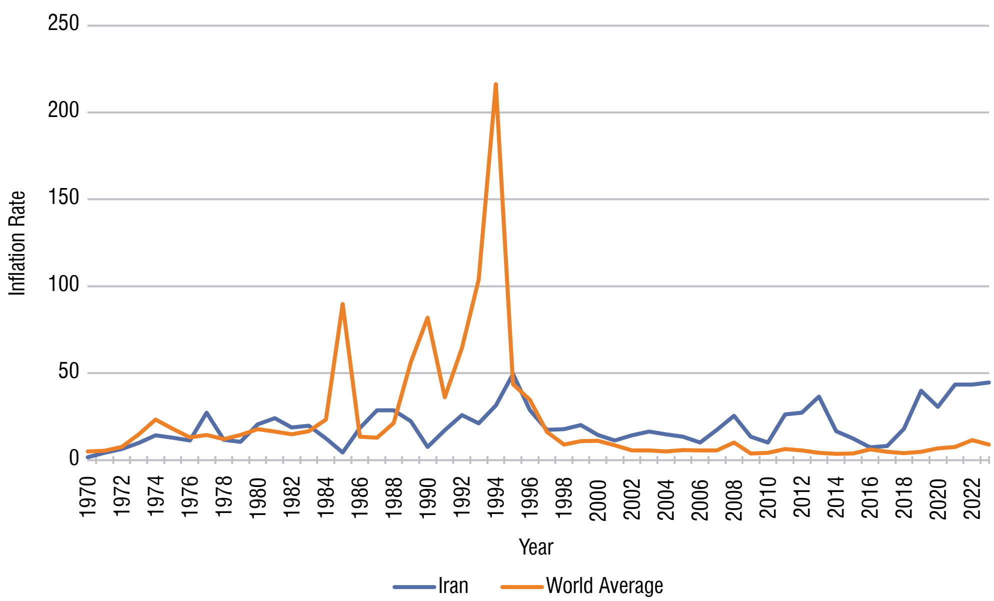
cont. Figure 3



Source: own material based on data from the Population Division Data Portal [United Nations, 2026].

Another challenge facing the government is persistent long-term inflation. As shown in Figure 4, Iran's inflation rate has generally risen over the past fifty years, beginning in the 1970s. The volatility – and relatively high levels – of inflation, particularly from the late 1990s onwards, require the government to implement appropriate adjustments to citizens' incomes, as stipulated in the annual budget law. These adjustments are affected through the revision of salary rates for employees in both the public and private sectors.

Figure 4. Iran's inflation rate since 1970



Source: World Bank Group [2025].

Summary

This study demonstrates that Iran's social security system presents a complex and multifaceted landscape shaped by a long historical legacy and marked socio-economic transformations. Although rooted in ancient precedents, the system experienced periods of neglect before its revival in the early twentieth century, influenced particularly by Western social policy models. Administrators describe the system as a DB-PAYG scheme; however, in practice, it operates with a hybrid reliance on both ongoing contributions from active members and accumulated assets. In recent years, demographic shifts and economic challenges have caused a growing imbalance between their inflows and liabilities, threatening financial sustainability.

The government has sought to fulfil its social insurance responsibilities by sharing responsibilities with various pension funds, yet the contribution of life insurance companies remains supplementary and limited in scope due to cultural reservations about private insurance products. Crucially, the absence of a central regulatory authority overseeing the diverse pension funds has led to a fragmented legal framework, with this fragmentation generating disparities in retirement benefits and undermining equity among retirees.

Accordingly, the findings of this study support the thesis that while social protection is formally embedded in Iran's legal and policy frameworks, persistent systemic inconsistencies combined with ongoing socio-economic shifts erode the system's prospects for sustained effectiveness. Subsequently, Iran's fragmented yet interconnected social security system requires comprehensive and coordinated reforms – both structural and parametric. Strengthening regulatory oversight, standardising pension fund governance, and ensuring consistent, actuarially sound financing mechanisms are essential steps to secure the system's long-term viability and promote equitable social protection coverage.

However, reforms that introduce or differentiate levels of protection pose significant challenges. The transition from the current system to a more clearly structured model requires resolving foundational issues, including the legal status of funds, pension formulas, contribution levels, and the transfer of existing assets – each of which requires legal, economic, social and actuarial analysis.

Disclaimer

Given that part of the source material was in Persian, the free version of the GPT-5 artificial intelligence system, as well as Perplexity, were employed for translation purposes and to provide concise summaries of these materials.

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