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Iran, the US and the Arab World: The Dynamics of Counterrevolutionary Forces

Hamid Dabashi | July 2015

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Soft Power and Asymmetric Warfare	3
What is left of the Arab Revolutions?	4
Negative Dialectics	5
Conclusion	7

Introduction

The emergence of Hassan Rouhani in the course of Iran's 2013 presidential election promised a new chapter in the tumultuous relationship between Iran and the US. On September 27, 2013 presidents Obama and Rouhani had a telephone conversation while the latter was in New York for the UN General Assembly meeting. Two months later, Iran and the P5+ 1 signed the interim Agreement in Geneva. By December, during a GCC meeting in Kuwait, Arab countries appeared cautiously optimistic about the agreement. The fact that secret talks between Iran and the US were reported to have taken place much earlier (perhaps as early as during Ahmadinejad's administration) in Oman may in fact indicate that official Arab awareness and approval of this deal predates its public knowledge.¹

The sharp and critical edge of the US and Iran relationship will be effectively felt first and foremost in Syria, and it is from here that the rest of the Arab world will feel the future consequences of any improved relationship between the two historic nemesis. Particularly critical to Obama's second term, and given his proven reluctance to engage in more visible military operations in the region, is Iran's soft power in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Yemen in particular, and its significance for Iran's struggle for regional power for decades to come. The course of the Arab revolutions has generated a new calculus of power in the region. Given its vast network of soft power, Iran is now indispensable for the future of US interests in the region – a deeply troubling development for Israel, but one of mixed implications for the Arab world.²

The common wisdom that Iran is the unconditional supporter of Bashar Assad is patently flawed. Iran will throw Assad under the proverbial bus the instant it sees it best serving its larger regional interests. But the fact that Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic are beginning to see eye to eye on Syria points to two fundamental facts: (1) that they both fear the unraveling revolutions in the Arab world and (2) that they are both on the same page with the US on this matter. The rapprochement between the US

¹ According to reports: "Secret US-Iran talks cleared way for historic nuclear deal. US and Iranian officials have been meeting secretly in Oman for the past year with the help of Sultan Qaboos." For details see here: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/10471030/Secret-US-Iran-talks-cleared-way-for-historic-nuclear-deal.html>.

² For an articulation of the idea of "soft power" from an American imperial perspective see Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics* (2005).

and Iran is thus effectively a rapprochement among the counterrevolutionary forces across the Arab world, united in their concern for the short and long term consequences of the Arab Spring.³

Iran and Saudi Arabia represent the two most powerful counterrevolutionary forces in the region, and their evident hostility has not only helped to degenerate these revolutions into a Sunni-Shi'i sectarianism, but through this false representation, has also acted like a pair of scissors cutting through the revolutionary momentum that threatens both their regimes. It is for this reason that there emerged a somewhat forced *ménage a trois* among Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel in safeguarding their respective interests, aligning them in their opposition of the more radical implications of these revolutions. The ostensible hostility between Iran and Israel on the one hand, and Iran and Saudi Arabia on the other, does not negate, but rather exacerbates the factual force of this counterrevolution triumvirate.

The implication of any emerging rapprochement between Iran and the US for the larger Arab world will depend on what we mean by the Arab world—its ruling regimes or its revolutionary uprisings. In fact none of the three forces—neither Iran, nor the Arab world or the US—are stable entities. All of them are in a state of flux, though each in a slightly different way. The prospect of a rapprochement between the US and Iran has far reaching regional implications, far more serious than merely lifting the economic sanctions in exchange for limiting Iran's nuclear program. By far the most successful result of this Saudi - Iran alliance (through a paradoxical dialectic) is the aggressive degeneration of the Syrian revolution into sectarian violence. In exchange for a comfortable zone in the nuclear deal, Iran will happily abandon Bashar Assad to his own non-existent means.

Presiding over this triumvirate is the US. But there are a number of other alliances— say among Iran, the US, and Russia, which, thanks to the rise of the Russian imperial attitude in the region, has now assumed a much bolder posture in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis. As a result, one should not assume the US as being the key catalyst in the relationship among Arabs and Iranians. Ultimately, insofar as this particular triangulation is concerned, it is structurally designed to oppose and end the

³ According to some analysts: "A Saudi-Iranian rapprochement that did not seem possible a few months ago is now happening." For details see here: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2014/05/23/Why-Saudi-Iranian-rapprochement-will-succeed-this-time.html>.

revolutionary momentum of the Arab Spring, as well as that of the Green Movement in Iran, and way beyond across the rest of the Muslim world.

Soft Power and Asymmetric Warfare

Two critical concepts in the current geopolitics of the region are of paramount importance for any configuration of politics as it may emerge in the region: the related concepts of “hard power” and “soft power,” and those of “shock and awe” and “asymmetric warfare.”⁴

Joseph Nye’s notion of “soft power”, first theorized in his *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (1990) and subsequently developed more fully in his *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004), outlined the range of non-military means of advancing political goals. Strategies ranging from active diplomacy to foreign aids and economic aids came together to provide a more organic frame for the global advancement of American strategic and imperial interests. But the best example of soft power (though in precisely the opposite way in which Joseph Nye meant it) is what Iran wields in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, perhaps even in Bahrain or as far as in Yemen, which then becomes hard power in the context of Syria. When we place these two opposing directions of the “soft power” next to each other we are in the domain of an “asymmetric warfare.” Andrew J.R. Mack in his article "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars" (1975) developed the idea of how superpowers might lose to smaller armies. But it was in the aftermath of 9/11 that the nature of asymmetric warfare became more prominent, following the US - led invasion of Afghanistan. The Hezbollah victory over Israel in 2006, and the ability of the Taliban to mount an amorphous warfare are the clearest indications of this asymmetric warfare. The rise of the so-called Islamic State might thus be considered a counterrevolutionary strategy to cast the balance between soft and hard power into disequilibrium to the advantage of the ruling regimes.

What destabilizes the counterrevolutionary dynamics of the ruling regimes, and their interactions with the imperial forces in the region, is the revolutionary production of counterhegemonic formations in the region—such as the reversal of the imperial operation of soft power corroborated with the logic and rhetoric of asymmetric warfare. If Iran uses its soft power against the hard power of the US and Israel, Iranian citizens,

⁴ For more on the nature and function of “asymmetrical warfare” see Rodd Thornton, *Asymmetric Warfare: Threat and Response in the 21st Century* (2007).

on the other hand are using the same strategy against the hard power of the state, as do all Arabs from Morocco to Syria facing the brutalities and conniving of their ruling regimes. The combined effects of soft power and asymmetric warfare thus spreads over three layers of operation: (1) between the US and smaller nation-states, (ii) in the resistances of smaller nations against the US, and (iii) by non-violent civil rights activists and ordinary citizens against repressive regimes such as those of Iran, Syria, Israel, or Bahrain.

What is left of the Arab Revolutions?

Three years into the dramatic unfolding of the Arab revolutions, the rapprochement between Iran and the US raises a more fundamental question of where exactly do we stand vis-à-vis these revolutions—or more importantly, what is left of the Arab revolutions? In Tunisia and Libya the uprising has been by and large localized, for better (Tunisia) or for worse (Libya). In Bahrain it has been successfully repressed. In Yemen it has degenerated into insular infighting under the hegemony of the Saudis. That leaves Egypt and Syria. In Egypt a democratically elected (however incompetent) president has been toppled by a military coup, and in Syria the Saudi-Iranian rivalry turned a by and large peaceful revolution into a proxy war falsely waged between Sunni Wahhabis and Shi'is Alavis.

What is left of the Arab revolutions is precisely the left of the Arab revolutions—now coagulated in the feeble face of Hamdeen Sabahi in Egypt: Jaundiced and lacking convictions – cliché-ridden, purposeless, and poorly thought through. The left of the Arab (or Iranian for that matter) revolutions are yet to be thought through before being put into practice, not just in organizational terms, but far more urgently in theoretical and conceptual terms. Where does the Arab left stand on these revolutions? And where exactly is the Arab or Iranian left?

To reconfigure the left for the Arab and Iranian world and beyond we need to turn to Adorno and his *Negative Dialectics* (1966) for the following reason: to overcome the condition of postcoloniality we have inherited over the last two centuries and more – and in whose terms we continue to think through our revolutions, whereas it is precisely the production of a new regime of knowledge we need. Adorno wrote his *Negative Dialectics* during similar contexts, sometime after the Jewish Holocaust and the simultaneous collapse of the Soviet model in USSR and just before the European protests of the 1968.

Negative Dialectics

A negative trajectory has emerged in the aftermath of the rise of the Arab revolutions in which the stated objective of the historical actors produces the opposite effect of what they claim they desire. Iran desires support for Assad, Saudi Arabia desires the success of Jihadist forces. The two aims seem and are contradictory. But they result in the dismantling of a revolutionary force that threatens both Iran and the Saudi Arabia—so much so that the evident opposition of Iran and Saudi Arabia in effect desires and seeks to achieve identical objectives, which is the derailing of the revolutionary momentum of the Arab Spring.

In *Negative Dialectic* Adorno took the classical notion of the term “dialectics”—that from the opposition of two negations a positive result will emerge—to task. In its Hegelian rendition, dialectic worked through contradiction and tension, whereby human history garners the unfolding of human freedom as the expression of the *Weltgeist*. From Hegel to Marx, this dialectic unfolds in an increasingly emancipatory direction until its final fulfillment. Adorno adopted the Hegelian dialectic but relieved it of its necessarily positive, rational, progressive movement toward the Absolute. Adorno is here fully conscious of the post-Holocaust Europe and wants to bring not just the fact of suffering but also the reality of unreason into the working of the dialectic. Not every dialectic results in a positive outcome.

Adorno’s notion of negative dialectic is poised to account for negative outcomes of two sets of positive dialectical forces and thereby accounting for lacunae in world history. Negative dialectic frees the historical materialism from immediate positive results and from the Hegelian dictum that “what is real is what is rational,” while soft power through asymmetric warfare migrates from the will to power to the will to resist power. But the operation of soft power and asymmetric warfare is not just between states; it is equally operative within states, between the state apparatus and the society it tries to rule.

Transformation of national liberation movements into civil rights movements, on the model of Palestinians in Israel and in the occupied territories or among the Kurds in Syria and Turkey provide the best models of this transformation. There is a structural affinity for revolutionary soft power between sub-nationalized categories like the Kurds or the Palestinians and the realm of the revolutionary mimesis. Adorno believed that “the need to let suffering speak is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity

that weighs upon the subject ... ⁵ The expression of that suffering is not just in political terms the way Palestinians or the Kurds have endured them, one by occupation and the other by disintegration. The emerging regimes of knowledge will need to take heed from Adorno's prognosis that the mimetic potentials of the language can conflate its semantics. To achieve that liberation of the object from its endemic fetishization, Adorno offered the formation of new "constellation" of concepts whereby liberating objects from their legislated semantics into unforeseen and yet viable offshoots of their received classifications.

Through the intermediary functions of the US, Russia, EU, or China, we need to collectively observe the fate of our revolutionary age in both the Iranian and the Arab world in a state of flux. In this respect, we will all be better off if we were to turn to critical thinkers like Adorno or Benjamin when they were writing in either response (Adorno) or in anticipation (Benjamin) of the catastrophe that their European homeland experienced during the Jewish Holocaust, for that cataclysmic catastrophe was just a heavy dosage of precisely the same medicine European imperialism and colonialism were administering to the world at large.

In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno was still reacting to the horrors of the Jewish Holocaust when he effectively suspended the course of the Marxist reaction to the European uprising of 1968 when he proposed that the whole conception of political praxis had to await the production of a new theory of action that would transform consciousness. Adorno insisted on an urgent interpretation of experience. This is no easy task, for habitually we associate things (like a revolutionary uprising, the toppling of a regime, the flight of a dictator) backward to things we already know. What Adorno considered a fetishized relationship between the subject and the object for us at the colonial edges of the now decentered capital amounts to the alienated world which we assimilate backward into colonial terms of operation—ranging from "democracy" to "human rights" to the relations of power not so successfully hidden in terms such as "referendum" or "election." Regimes such as the Islamic republic of Iran, or Egypt under Sisi, or Syria under Assad, have so successfully eviscerated these terms from any meaning that the political objective can no longer be in terms domestic and familiar to these vacuous words.

⁵ Theodore W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (Bloomsbury Academic, 1981): 17–18.

Adorno charged concepts he had received at his time with being philosophically hypostatized, namely their relationship to the particularities they intended to universalize frozen in abstraction. His proposition is to re-establish a link between concept and nonconceptuality they have effectively silenced. His ambition was to create a critical consciousness in which concepts are preempted from this hypostatization by way of a tense conversation between what they have silenced and what they wish to conceptualize. Adorno drives this line of thought towards the ambitious proposition of a rapprochement between the reified universals and the amorphous particulars, thus dismantling the oppressively alienated relationship between the two. One can clearly read the guilt-ridden mind of a German Jewish philosopher's mind that did not anticipate the horrors of the Holocaust ahead of him, and who he was as the particular that the Hegelian universal had refused to incorporate into the European subject. He was coming to terms with his Jewish particularity, disrupting his European (Hegelian) claim to universality.

Along those lines, what precisely is the new regime of knowledge we need to develop? It is to allow for the particulars of our emerging world to challenge the universals we have inherited. These particulars are now beyond the conditions of postcoloniality we have inherited.

Conclusion

The triumvirate of Iran, the Arab World, and the US does not contain stable entities and is animated by volatile and changing dynamics. The US wishes to stabilize the region for its immediate and long-term imperial domination and neoliberal economics, which at one and the same time globalizes the condition of constitutional injustice rampant in the US and around the globe. Iran has violently suppressed the democratic aspiration of its own citizens and keeps pushing the dynamics of its politics into the geopolitics and indeed astropolitics of the region so it can use its facility with soft power to juggle an enduring position of power and significance for itself. The Arab world continues to be ruled by regimes hostile to the social justice and economic equanimity that this like any other world needs. Any time we consider any such triangulation of power we need to think how it can be turned against the interest of the dominant regimes and to the benefit of the revolutionary forces. But to do so, we first and foremost need to reconfigure a world beyond the condition of postcoloniality so we can mobilize our untapped forces beyond the secular-religious or the Arab-Iranian, or the Sunni-Shi'i, or indeed Islam and Western binaries.