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Iran and the Arab Revolutions: Positions and Repercussions

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Introduction

Iran counts as one of the non-Arab states in the region which nonetheless has an impact on the Arab countries; the corollary is that it also is impacted by the Arab states. This paper seeks to examine the official positions the Islamic Republic of Iran, including those positions held both by “conservative” and “reformist” camps, and their attitude towards the Arab popular uprisings of 2011 in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain and Syria. Further to this, we will also discuss the effect which these positions have on the internal situation in Iran, and how this will impact Iran’s influence in countries in the region.

There is, by and large, a consensus throughout the Iranian political spectrum in support of the popular revolutions in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Bahrain. Yet there are differences between the two broad camps – reformist on the one hand as well as the conservative and the regime – with regard to how to interpret the root causes of these revolutions. Likewise, while the Iranian government has supported the Syrian regime in its resistance to popular protests, reformers regard this stance as hypocritical and double-standard. The research in this paper points to the conclusion that while Iran as a whole may have gained from the victory of the revolutionary forces in Egypt, it has lost from its stances in relation to Bahrain and Syria.

With the fall of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and the accelerated pace of the Egyptian Revolution against Hosni Mubarak, an Iranian attitude towards the Arab Spring began to coalesce, an attitude which broadly took in both the reformists and the conservatives, and was supportive of the two revolutions mentioned above. The Iranians were also supportive of both the Libyan and Yemeni revolutions; again, both political blocs within Iran supported these two revolts. Although the governmental camp in Iran was opposed to Western involvement and the NATO military intervention in Libya, it remained committed to the popular uprising in that country. Yet, while there is widespread popular support for the Arab uprisings in Iran, there is no agreement on the bases and reasons for this support; in other words, there is no common Iranian prism through which these events are being viewed.

Iranian Officialdom and Iranian Conservatives: Approaches to the Arab Revolts

When focusing on the positions of the conservative and pro-government elements towards popular revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya, some telling points emerge:

- 1) Iranians who are broadly “pro-government” have described the Arab Spring as “a harbinger of a period of Islamic awakening, inspired by the Iranian Islamic Revolution”¹ in the words of Khamenei. In this worldview, the Arab revolts were only possible because of the “blessed

¹ See report on Lebanon Now (Arabic): “Khamenei: The popular protests in Tunisia and Egypt are signs of an Islamic awakening”, February 4, 2011, <http://www.nowlebanon.com/arabic/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=237383>

not establish theocratic rule^{8 9} like that in Iran. This sentiment even extends to the Salafist groups¹⁰.

- 3) Pro-government Iranians also project an ideological, anti-American angle on these revolutions through focusing on the regime stances on the West and Israel, in the countries swept by revolutions. Khamenei has said of deposed Mubarak that “he has been a loyal servant to the Americans and Israel for 30 years,”¹¹ suggesting that this was the main factor behind his overthrow. In the words of another conservative figure, Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami, who confirmed in his Friday sermon delivered on April 1st, that “the people of the region want Islam and long for dignity, as well as they look to a future where their fate is not decided by the United States.”¹² In another statement evocative of the early days of the Islamic Revolution, during which there was much talk of “exporting” the Iranian model which constituted a component of the Iranian Islamic revolution ideology, Khamenei went so far as to say that the growing wave of Islamic awakening in the Middle-East, North Africa and other parts of the Muslim world has been inspired by Iran’s Islamic Revolution, and said this awakening will definitely spread to the European countries. “This awakening move will certainly advance to the very heart of the Europe and the European nations will rise against their politicians and rulers who have fully surrendered to the US and the Zionists’ cultural and economic policies.”¹³

The Arab Revolutions and Questions of Domestic Iranian Politics

As stated above, the consensus across the Iranian political spectrum is to support the Arab revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Libya, although there is some disagreement between the Iranian government and the conservatives on the one hand, and reformists on the other, as to how to properly understand the causes of these revolutions, their repercussions on Iran as well as contextualize these rebellions. The conservatives have poured Islamist meaning and ideology into the events in Arab countries, willfully ignoring any of the factors associated with personal liberty,

⁸ Statements of Tunisian Islamist leader Rachid Ghannouchi, leader of the Tunisian Al-Nahda party (Arabic), Aljazeera, May 2, 2011:

<http://www.aljazeera.net/Mob/Templates/Postings/NewsDetailedPage.aspx?GUID=0A7FA5E5-AFFB-4F94-B9AA-91B354408B2D>

⁹ Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood General Guide Mohammed Badee', *Al Youm Al-Sabeh*, (Arabic), April 28, 2011: <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=400453>

¹⁰ Abdullah Shaker, Head of the Ansar as Sunnah Salafist group of Egypt, headquarters, (Arabic) April 3, 2011: <http://www.elsonna.com/play.php?catsmktba=13221>

¹¹ Khamenei, *op. cit.*

¹² Statements by Ayatollah Khatami, “**Velayat-e faqih** (rule of the Islamic jurists), unity and revolutionary spirit are the factors behind the steadfastness of the Islamic Republic”, Mehr News Agency, April 1, 2011 : <http://www.mehrnews.com/ar/NewsDetail.aspx?pr=s&query=%الثورة20فائدة%20&NewsID=1279727>

¹³ Statements by Khamenei “This awakening move will certainly advance to the very heart of the Europe”, Mehr News Agency , May 4, 2011

<http://www.mehrnews.com/ar/NewsDetail.aspx?pr=s&query=%خامنئي%20&NewsID=1305055>

democracy and social justice which might also have played a part in providing the revolutionary spark.

Contrary to the official line in Tehran, Iranian reformists have sought to highlight the social triggers for the uprisings, as well as those related to personal liberties and freedoms; they have also used this perspective to tie in the Arab revolts with the situation in Iran, with the aim of suggesting that their own revolts might not be that far behind. It is in this regard that we can view the statements of reformist leader and former Prime Minister Mir Hussein Mousavi, who emphasized that “they do not say that if the regime respected the sovereignty of the people to determine their own fate and if it refrained from stealing the recent Egyptian [legislative] elections, it would not be facing the demand of “overthrow of the system” by the respected people of Egypt.”¹⁴ In a direct response to the conservative leaders, and particularly Khamenei, Mousavi stated that the leadership of Iran spoke of the anger of the Egyptian people, but did not speak of its true causes. These were, in Mousavi’s words, “they underline the Egyptian “day of people’s anger,” but fail to mention that this day of anger is the result of inefficiency and corruption at the highest levels, squandering of public funds, restriction of written and spoken word, and executions and executions and executions, the setting up of gallows in public to terrorize the people.”¹⁵ In a sense, these kinds of statements show the willingness of Iranian reformists to draw parallels between liberties and economic as well as political corruption in both present-day Iran and pre-revolutionary Egypt. While the conservative camp, including the official spokespersons, traces the inspiration of the Arab Spring to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iranian reformers tend to see a thread tying the Arab revolts to their own “Green Revolution”, following the 2009 parliamentary elections. In this regard, they point to the parallels insisting on similarities in circumstances, causes and methods used by both the Egyptian and Iranian regimes in treating the protesters on those two occasions^{16 17}.

It seems, therefore, that while the Iranian regime displayed a high level of support for the Arab popular revolutions, it also felt threatened by the possibility that the reformists inside Iran would be inspired by them, and try to reproduce the experience in their own country. A number of statements hinting at this possibility were made by reformist figures, including former President Sayyed Mohammed Khatami, who asked Iranians to “follow the lead of the Egyptian people, to pursue their demands for reform and change, to continue criticism of the government and to refute [electoral] fraud and tyranny.”¹⁸

In a bid to prevent the contagion of revolt from spreading to Iran, the regime undertook the following steps:

¹⁴ Mousavi Statement on Recent Events in the Arab World, PBS, January 29, 2011, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/01/mousavi-issues-statement-on-tunisia-egypt-and-iran.html>

¹⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁶ Mohammed Ali, Najah, “Khatami on the Anniversary of the Revolution: Egypt Impacted the Historic Reformist Movement of Iran”, Al-Arabiyya, (Arabic), February 8, 2011: <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/02/08/136788.html>

¹⁷ Yazdanpanah, Mohammed Reza, *op.cit.*

¹⁸ Mohammed Ali, Najah, “Khatami on the Anniversary of the Revolution: Egypt Impacted the Historic Reformist Movement of Iran”, *op. cit.*

- Promoting a media campaign to focus on the pioneering role of the Iranian people, and the Iranian republic standing steadfast against “Western arrogance”, always taking care to mention “enemies’ plans” which seek to destroy the Iranian model;¹⁹
- Emphasizing the democratic characteristics of the Iranian regime, making clear to note that Iran undertook elections even in the midst of the Iran-Iraq war, while the “enemy was bombing our towns” in the words of Sayyed Ahmad Khatami while delivering his Friday sermon temporarily in Teheran; ²⁰
- Trying to control the way in which news of the Arab revolutions, especially the Egyptian Revolution, reached the Iranian citizens. According to allegations made by the BBC, the authorities in Tehran even attempted to interfere with BBC Persian broadcasts;²¹
- Refusing to grant permission for celebratory rallies in honor of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions organized by the reformist movement, on February 14, 2011 and even placing a reformist former presidential candidate, Mehdi Karroubi, under house arrest, in addition to accusations of imposing mobility restrictions on reformist leader Mousavi.²² Yet the government denied those allegations. The authorities also imprisoned a number of other reformist leaders, including Taqi Rahmani and former Minister of Social Affairs Mohammad Hossein Sharif Zadegan²³.
- Extreme repression of unlicensed protests held by the opposition on February 14, with one person reported killed at least and dozens injured in clashes with the police²⁴.

¹⁹ Statements by Sayed Ali Khamanei, “Revolution leader: the Iranian Islamic revolution, a model for Islamic awakening in the region”, Mehr News Agency, March 4, 2011

<http://www.mehrnews.com/ar/NewsDetail.aspx?pr=s&query=%0خامنه‌ئي20&NewsID=1266325>

²⁰ Statements by Sayed Ahmad Ayatollah Khatami, “**Velayat-e faqih** (rule of the Islamic jurists), unity and revolutionary spirit are the factors behind the steadfastness of the Islamic Republic”, Mehr News Agency, *op. cit.*

²¹ Andy Bloxham, BBC Persian service 'jammed from within Iran', *The Telegraph*, February 11, 2011

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/8318082/BBC-Persian-service-jammed-from-within-Iran.html>

²² Saeed Kamali Dehghan, Iran's supreme leader accused of abducting key opponents, *The Guardian*, March 6, 2011

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/06/iran-supreme-leader-accused-abducting>

²³ Many Protesters still held in Iran, Amnesty International, <http://www.amnesty.ie/content/many-protesters-still-held>

²⁴ Saeed Kamali Dehghan, Iran protests see reinvigorated activists take to the streets in thousands, *The Guardian*, February 14, 2011

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/14/iran-protests-reinvigorated-activists>

(GCC) decision which saw the use of military forces to suppress protesters at Luluwa Roundabout, Sulaimania Hospital and other places³¹.

- The Iranian authorities followed this up with a diplomatic push among Islamic countries asking for the “protection” of the Bahraini people and the rejection of GCC military intervention.³².

As for the Bahraini government and its supporters at home and abroad, the Iranian position reflected a sectarian bias^{33 34}. This, of course, was denied by the Iranian authorities, with Khamenei stating that “we will always stand beside any oppressed nation, anywhere in the world”³⁵. A close following of Iran’s positions, however, reveals a very specific approach to the situation in Bahrain; unlike the situation in other Arab countries experiencing revolutions, the Iranians have escalated the diplomatic war of words unlike the verbal support Iran granted to popular revolutions in other countries. This somewhat corroborates the allegations of a sectarian agenda on the part of the leadership of Iran, particularly when one considers the resolutions of the **Iranian Islamic Shura** Council [parliament], which spoke of how “speech about a Shiite Crescent was a prelude to ethnic cleansing of the Shiites from Yemen and Bahrain”, and condemned “the spilling of Shiite blood”³⁶.

Iranian Attitudes to the Syrian Uprising

Iranian officialdom and the conservative stream have united in their support of the Syrian government in its response to the popular revolts in that country since they began on March 18, 2011. This has been seen in the way that the Iranian authorities have completely adopted the official Syrian narrative of the nature and the reasoning behind the Syrian rebellion: a foreign

³¹ Statement by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei declaring that the Bahraini revolution is “not sectarian” and is no different from the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, *Al-Shark Al-Awsat Newspaper*, (Arabic), March 23, 2011 <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=613834&issueno=11803>

³² Foreign Minister Larjani sends letters to his counterparts in Muslim countries around the situation, May 2011, Mehr News Agency, may 2, 2011 <http://www.mehrnews.com/ar/NewsDetail.aspx?pr=s&query=%تونس%20&NewsID=1303328>

³³ See statements by GCC foreign ministers, Bahrain News Agency, GCC Foreign Ministers Condemn Blatant Iranian Interference In Bahrain's Internal Affairs April 4, 2011: <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-253229627.html>

³⁴ See statement by Saudi Foreign Minister Saud Al Faisal, Saudi Foreign Minister Slams Iranian Statements, Bahrain News Agency, April 10, 2011:

<http://www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/452307?date=2011-04-11>

and statements by Kuwaiti members of the National Assembly responding to Iran chief of staff, The Arrogant Iran regime is repressing its own people, *Electronic Economic Magazine*, (Arabic), may 2, 2011

http://www.aleqt.com/2011/05/02/article_533625.html

and statement by the Muslim Scholars Association, The events in Bahrain foment a sectarian strife aiming at eradicating the Sunnis, *As-Siyassa daily Newspaper*, (Arabic), March 25, 2011

³⁵ See Khamenei's statements, *Al-Shark Al-Awsat Newspaper*, (Arabic), *op. cit.*

³⁶ Iran Shura Council calls for UN **rights council** emergency session, Mehr News Agency, April 20, 2011: <http://www.mehrnews.com/ar/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1293311>

conspiracy to undermine the steadfastness and the “pro-resistance” stance with regard to Zionist and Western hegemony in the Middle East. They even described the events as being “similar to the discord sowed in Iran in 2009”³⁷.

The extent of this Iranian support for the Syrian regime also can be gleaned from a brief survey of official Iranian news outlets which were avoiding the opposition reports and figures.³⁸ More than once, Iran confirmed its confidence in the ability of the Syrian government capability to survive the current events and expressed its support for the reforms announced by president Bashar Al-Assad.³⁹ Of course, Iran would be fully aware of the popularity of Syria’s stance with regard to Israel on the Arab street, and that would explain why its leaders emphasize this aspect of the Syrian regime’s behavior in their media campaigns, finding it possible to state that “[the present revolution in Syria] is an American plot to aid the Zionist Entity” and to assert its confidence in the ability of Syria to “continue to play its historic role in the region”⁴⁰.

The irony of the situation was brought to a head when the Iranian government accused the United States of double standards over its support for popular revolutions; because of their discourse backing the popular revolutions in the Middle East despite their history of “supporting despotic regimes in the region”⁴¹. This contradiction was capitalized on by the reformist opposition in Iran, which, in turn, saw fit to accuse the regime and its supporters of their own double standards for supporting revolution in Egypt and Bahrain, opposing it in Syria and repressing it in Iran⁴².

The reformists attacked vehemently the official Iranian news outlets. One of the critics of the regime was a former deputy foreign minister, Sayyed Mohammed Sadr, who wrote an article criticizing how the regime-backed media were reporting the public protests in Syria; according to Sadr, what was required of Iran was to more helpfully counsel Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in a bid to

³⁷ Statement by the Iranian Ambassador to Syria, Fars News, April 4, 2011:

<http://arabic.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=9001150102>

³⁸ See for example the following reports in the semi-official Fars News Agency

“Anglo-Zionist Conspiracy to Topple the Government of Syria”, (Arabic) Fars News Agency, May 9, 2011:

<http://arabic.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=9002191474>,

“Middle East Expert Blames Saudi Prince for De-stablizing Syria”, Fars News Agency, April 23, 2003:

<http://arabic.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=9002030517>

and “After the Seizure of an Arms Cache from Lebanon: Assad Declares Reforms”, Fars News Agency, March 29, 2011:

<http://arabic.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=9001090005>

³⁹ Iran rebuts US meddling allegations, Press TV, April 25, 2011

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/176577.html>

⁴⁰ Iran is confident in Syria’s historic role in the Islamic and Arab countries, Fars News Agency, May 6, 2011:

<http://arabic.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=9002160043>

⁴¹ See An Iranian diplomat requests Aljazeera to cover Bahrain more fairly, Mehr News Agency, *op. cit.*

⁴² See for example “The Free Shi’ite: Freedom for Mousavi and Karoubi, an end to religious terror and freedom is a people’s sacred right”, Rah-e Sabz News Agency, (Farsi), May 6, 2011:

<http://www.rahesabz.net/story/36818/>

persuade him to listen to his own people and implement true reforms in his country⁴³. Mousavi's website [kaleme.com] also spoke of the difference in how official Iranian and official Syrian news agencies covered the events of April 23: while the Syrian authorities acknowledged that some protesters had been killed in clashes, the official Iranian media denied that anything had taken place on that particular Friday⁴⁴. Of course, none of this is surprising, given the nature of the strategic relationship between the two countries, which dates to the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The demise of the present Syrian regime, or its mere weakening, would have negative repercussions on Iranian influence in Lebanon and beyond, with Syria serving as Iran's geopolitical gateway to the region.

Conclusion

We can come to the following conclusions about how the various political blocs within Iran have reacted to the various Arab revolutions:

- 1) While the reformists and the conservatives, together with the pro-Ahmadinejad camps, all support the revolutions in Bahrain, Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen, they disagree about the root causes of these revolts.
- 2) Iranian officialdom and the conservative trend of Iranian politics tend to view the Arab revolutions as having been inspired by Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1979, while reformists draw the comparison with the 2009 "Green Revolution" within Iran.
- 3) While both the conservative camp and the official positions in Iran accentuated the "Islamic" character of the popular uprisings in the Arab countries, Iranian opposition leaders tended to see them as revolts against injustice, tyranny and corruption.
- 4) The reformists managed to capitalize on the fact that at the same time the government banned their marches in support of the Arab protests while it was expressing its support for these revolutions, using this to attack the official position.
- 5) Iran's position as one of the main players in the region remains firm, and it stands to gain from the victories of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions. Statements by Egypt's new foreign minister, Nabil Al Arabi, in which he spoke of rapprochement with Iran, have shown the validity of this belief, as has a new-found Egyptian willingness to deal with all actors across the Lebanese political spectrum, including Hizbullah. More tangibly, Egypt's Supreme

⁴³ Mohammad Sadr, Syria amid revolution and reform, Payvand Iran News, April 27, 2011:
<http://www.payvand.com/news/11/apr/1257.html>

⁴⁴ See official website of Mir Hussein Mousavi, Shooting direct fire at funerals processions to bury victims of bloody Friday, Kaleme, April 24, 2011
: <http://www.kaleme.com/1390/02/04/klm-56135/>

Military Council allowed Iranian naval vessels to pass through the Suez Canal for the first time since the Islamic Revolution inaugurating a new era of Egyptian-Iranian relations.

- 6) Iran has lost some credibility on the Arab street due to its posturing in relation to the Bahraini protests, which many interpreted as being driven by sectarian interests.
- 7) The official Iranian stance in support of the Syrian regime led to the authorities in Tehran losing credibility among Iranian reformists. It also served as a message to the Arab public that Iran was more concerned with strategic political interests than with values of justice and freedom.
- 8) Yet the rise of a revolt against a regime which sits in the resistance and steadfastness [mumana'a] axis served to put paid about Iranian assumptions regarding the Arab revolutions: they could no longer be described merely as revolutions against the pro-Western governments which submit to the will of the United States and of Israel.
- 9) In general, it can be said that Iran's pro-government bloc – in this instance including both the conservative elements who support Ahmadinejad and those who support Khamenei – viewed the Arab revolts through the prism of Iran's foreign relations and regional alliances. It forms a plank of their policies to have Iran firmly ensconced as a major regional power, one which promotes Shiite power throughout the world. Iranian reformists, on the other hand, viewed these revolutions through the eyes of those who wish to change realities on the ground in Iran.