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Report

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➤ Iran and the Arab Spring

Naysan Rafati

The events of the Arab Spring, it has been argued, have their precursors in Iran. Yet the proponents of such a view are split over which Iran it is that serves as the inspiration for events in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and elsewhere: is it, as some officials from the Islamic Republic claim, their own 1979 revolution, which unseated Mohammad Reza Pahlavi from the Peacock Throne, or the Twittering, YouTubeing mass protests against that vision of a Republic which spilled into the streets of Tehran and other cities around the country three decades later?

The first point, which relates to Iran's domestic situation, is that despite the precedent for public protest in Iran, most notably in the form of the Green Movement which emerged after the contested reelection of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009, a resurgence of anti-government activism galvanised by the Arab Spring does not seem forthcoming, at least in the short-term. Secondly, while analyses of Iran's role in the Persian Gulf and the wider Middle East may diverge in their conclusions, they acknowledge, implicitly or outright, that Iran matters. This would inevitably have been the case given the country's position as a regional power based on indicators such as population and geography, economic strength, and military capability, but the religious ideology which underpins the regime, coupled with the policy stances it maintains on issues such as nuclear proliferation and the Arab-Israeli conflict, have failed to endear it to the West and some other influential Middle Eastern powers. Indeed, the argument could be made that, from Washington to Brussels to Riyadh, ongoing concern particularly over Iranian enrichment and a potential weapons capability contribute to the fact that Iranian engagement with countries in the Arab world is rarely viewed in isolation, and that this apprehension predates the transformative events of recent months. Thus in terms of shifting regional politics and Iran's role within the context of these changes, the Arab Spring has served to highlight the extent to which relations between actors can not be confined to a bilateral context. Finally, the still-uncertain fate of the protests in Syria, Iran's closest ally in the Middle East, underscores both the tension between rhetoric and interest facing Tehran, as well as representing perhaps the single most important strategic challenge that Iran will need to deal with as a result of the ongoing turmoil, with potentially far-reaching implications for its regional influence.

INTERNAL POLITICS AND IRAN'S VIEWS OF THE ARAB SPRING

If the Arab Spring has shown that regimes which appear stable can prove surprisingly weak, Iran might be considered weak yet surprisingly stable thus far when it comes to its domestic politics. Whatever the nature of the link between Iran's 2009 protests and the eruption of demonstrations throughout the Arab world over the course of 2011 and 2012, the primary areas of contestation within the Iranian political scene, as witnessed during the parliamentary elections held in March of this year, are no longer taking place between reformists and conservatives. Rather, they are increasingly taking place within and between conservative factions who pledge fidelity to the existing system even while promoting different visions for it. Iran's protesters, with their use of mass demonstrations and social media, may have foreshadowed what would take place in Tahrir Square and elsewhere, but a combination of internal weaknesses within the movement compounded by a robust and uncompromising response from the government against the opposition and its leadership has seemingly quieted the voices of dissent.

Nevertheless, as the rapidity and unpredictability of the protests elsewhere have shown, the potential for a rekindling of Iran's internal divisions can certainly not be ruled out, particularly as sanctions against the country chip away at the already fractured economic and commercial foundations of the Iranian state.

If the domestic political situation within Iran is one of relative stability though not assured strength, for the time being, the question then becomes how the Iranian regime views developments across the region: where it may sense opportunity, and where it may perceive threat. In other words, how will changes taking place within countries impact relations between countries, not only within a particular bilateral context but in a broader regional framework? The narrative expounded by Tehran has been broadly welcoming and supportive, but coloured by a specific interpretation of what has given cause to the uprisings; Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has described developments as a 'widespread awakening of nations, which is directed towards Islamic goals.' Using the language of 'Islamic Awakening' (Bidari-ye Eslami) seeks to find and develop commonalities between the *raison d'être* of the Iranian state and the protests, not only as a correlation to be drawn upon and exploited but as causation as well: 'the wave of the Islamic awakening resonated through the Islamic world as an export of the Islamic Republic of Iran,' one senior Iranian official has maintained. This interpretation, however, is at best little more than a partial explanation. While the increasing visibility of Salafist groups and organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt would seem to proffer fertile grounds for growing influence, the reality of developments is not so straightforward.

Religion and religiously-oriented groups have clearly played a part throughout the course of the Arab Spring, but how that will translate over the course of political transitions remains unclear. Moreover, even if Islamist parties consolidate themselves in positions of power, there are certainly no assurances that the model of the Islamic Republic offers any blueprint or idealised form for their mode of governance, or that a shared commitment to religion in political life will necessarily entail a closer strategic relationship to Tehran. Indeed, the politics of the Middle East have demonstrated that the compatibility of ideologies or

sectarian beliefs are no guarantor of harmonious relations, any more than a seeming incompatibility precludes them. Syrian-Iranian ties, bringing together a Persian, Shia theocracy with an Arab nationalist state, offer a case in point.

THE REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

One of the striking features of the Arab Spring in relation to Iran has been the difficulty of isolating any single bilateral relationship from a broader matrix of regional and international dynamics within which the events of 2011-2012 must be examined. Regional divisions and competition for influence and power are, of course, a longstanding feature of Middle Eastern politics, but of greatest relevance to present developments may be the emerging 'Cold War' between the two Gulf powers, Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which has become increasingly chilly since the fall of the Ba'ath in Iraq in 2003 and the consequently weakened geopolitical role of Baghdad. F. Gregory Gause III notes that in recent years 'the Saudis have pursued a policy of balancing against, rolling back where possible, Iranian influence in the Arab world.' If the Cold War analogy can be pushed, Bahrain may increasingly be seen as one of several potential Berlins – places where the two camps play out their rivalries, and whereby an integral aspect of Tehran-Manama relations cannot fail to take into consideration the position and interests of Riyadh. On the one hand, the grievances of the Kingdom's majority Shia population give a sectarian basis around which Iran can frame its concerns; 'the Bahraini nation is an oppressed nation,' Khamenei has opined. On the other hand the specter of Iranian interference unquestionably helped provoke the Saudi show of force that has buttressed the rule of the Al-Khalifa family.

This competition for influence between regional actors is compounded by the international, or perhaps more specifically Western, view of Iran as a destabilising force in a volatile region. This outlook has been held by Washington since the hostage crisis that accompanied the birth of the Islamic Republic, and has been solidified over subsequent years as a result of Iranian support for terrorism and the country's human

rights record. Over the last decade, however, and in the past few years in particular, it is the controversy over Iran's nuclear programme which has galvanised international cooperation against Iran. Sanctions are being regularly deepened and broadened by international, regional, and national actors, and represent one of several means through which Iran is being penalised for the irreconcilability of its nuclear project with foreign concerns. Iran has, of course, consistently argued that its enrichment activities are aimed to serve the exclusively peaceful ends of medical research and power generation rather than a weapons capability. And while the argument could be made that it is the legalistic nuances of proliferation and the agreements that govern it which motivate the sanctioning of Iran, the case could also be that it is the particular characteristics of Iranian policy which exacerbate the perception of threat. In other words, Iran's proliferation is a danger because of Iran's policies in other areas, while its proliferation in turn makes it more of a threat. The resumption of negotiations between the P5+1 (the US, UK, France, Russia, China, and Germany) and Iran in mid-April after more than a year, with a pledge to follow up with further talks, gives some cause to be optimistic about the prospects for an eventual diplomatic settlement, though the road to a major breakthrough remains long and potholed.

The promises and pitfalls of the Arab Spring can therefore be seen as part of a larger picture in which Iran's advances and setbacks are linked to efforts to curtail its influence and ambitions. This is the fundamental issue preoccupying Western policy makers: how to stymie Iranian advances into the vacuums that have emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring at a time when the perceived need to limit its influence, limit its trade, and limit its ambitions has been greatly heightened.

THE UNCERTAINTIES OF UPHEAVAL

The preceding paragraphs have highlighted two points, namely that Iran's interpretive framework of the Arab Spring explains what is taking place as favourable to its values and compatible with its interests, and that the regional and international context is broadly unsympathetic to seeing Tehran reap dividends from the changes taking place. Developments in the Levant give reason to question the first and underscore the second. While the uprising in Syria can be seen as a continuation of changes taking place elsewhere, bringing various forces together in opposition to a repressive and unrepresentative government, the narrative of religiously-inspired regional awakening proffered by the Islamic Republic can only be maintained by distinguishing the opposition to the rule of Bashar Al-Assad and his coterie from protests elsewhere. Thus, while Egypt, Libya, Tunisia et. al. reflect a nation's resistance to oppression and a growing popular religious consciousness, the repression of demonstrators in Hama, Homs, and elsewhere in Syria is, in Tehran's telling, a byproduct of foreign schemes rather than any reflection of legitimate indigenous grievances. Accounts in the Iranian press accordingly reel off a long list of countries in their reports on the Arab Spring – Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen will inevitably make their appearances – whilst Syria's unrest is conspicuous by its absence. 'The Americans and certain Western countries want to take revenge on Syria for their recent defeats in the region,' Khamenei has explained. 'The main purpose of the United States' plot in Syria is to deal a blow to the resistance front in the region because Syria is supporting the resistance of Palestine and the Islamic Resistance of Lebanon.' Shortly after the Friends of Syria announced that it would bankroll the Free Syrian Army, Iran's Defence Minister asked 'why do some countries promote civil war in Syria and support terrorist groups? If they want to help Syria why do not they support the trend of reforms and referendum which has begun in the country?' In Tehran's telling, then, while other regimes crumbled because they did not adhere to its own worldview and values, Damascus's burden has been shouldered because it has. The Iranian opposition, by contrast, has come out in favour of the uprising, deeming it

'an anti-dictatorial movement seeking freedom,' and viewing their own country's role with 'deep regret.' The image of two hands, one in Iranian colours bearing the slogan 'where is my vote?' and the other painted in the green, white, black and red standard of the Syrian opposition, form the image of a dove to illustrate their sympathies.

To be sure, the fall of the House of Assad is without question be the single most significant geostrategic setback Iran could end up facing as a result of the Arab Spring, depriving Iran of a stalwart regional partner as well as its collaborator in the support of groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas. And while the dissolution of a three decade-long Syrian-Iranian relationship would certainly be a blow in and of itself, the growing internationalisation of the conflict raises the stakes further, given that the increasingly assertive role of the Gulf States as well as Turkey in supporting and bankrolling the opposition undoubtedly adds to Iran's concerns. Reports are legion about active Iranian assistance to the Syrian regime to counter this possibility, and Western officials believe that training, weapons, and means to observe and disrupt the technological tools utilised by protesters have all been making their way to Damascus courtesy of the Iranian government. Iran is likely to continue standing shoulder to shoulder with Assad, supporting reforms by the regime instead of changes in regime, for as long as it can.

CONCLUSION

The opportunities and challenges that the Arab Spring has brought for Iran's leadership are complex and multifaceted. While the Islamic Republic seeks to stamp its imprimatur on regional events and situate them within a narrative resonant of its own, as successor regimes eventually emerge in Arab states such as Egypt and Libya, and the uprisings in Syria and Bahrain reach some sort of resolution, their specific dyadic relationships with Iran will undoubtedly witness varying degrees of reassessment based on perceptions of interests and ideological compatibility. Will Cairo-Tehran relations flourish in the wake of Mubarak, abetted by the Islamists, or will other factors rule out such reconciliation? To what extent will the Al-Khalifa family be able to satisfy the demands of the Bahraini opposition, and, having already received the assistance of their neighbours to the west, address relations with the neighbour to the north? Speculating on the exact contours that will emerge remains, of course, impossible – the region's capacity to upend expectations and confound conventional thinking has already been amply demonstrated. Taking a broader view suggests that developments at the bilateral, regional, and international levels give more reasons to question Iran's ability to project its influence and power across the changing face of the region than there are to anticipate it. ■