

Arab Uprisings, Iranian Influence, and the Middle East's Future

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JAMSHEED K. CHOKSY, NOV 12 2011

Events like the fall of Egyptian strongman Hosni Mubarak in February 2011 and the electoral rise of the Islamic Renaissance Movement through Tunisian politics in October have led some observers to conclude that fundamentalism's shadow will be cast over the Middle East.[1] Simultaneously, as Tehran's leaders trumpet their growing relationships with Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, it is feared that Iran will come out ahead in the region.[2]

The Middle East's strategic balance is seen to be at stake. The fate of American and European imperial Sunni allies in the region— including Jordan's Abdullah, Bahrain's Hamad ibn Isa Al-Khalifa, and most of all (for an oil hungry West) Saudi Arabia's Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Al-Saud — has become clouded in uncertainty.[3]

Political and religious struggles between Sunnis and Shiites date back to the first decades of Islam in the seventh century.[4] More recently Saudis suspect Iran of stirring up militant tensions that led to seizure of the Grand Mosque at Mecca in November 1979 and a pre-empted attack in August 1987. Riyadh has vehemently opposed Tehran's nuclear ambitions, especially through its ambassador to Washington who may have been targeted by Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Not surprisingly those simmering tensions have also focused on the Arab Rising.

Sunni Arab royal houses are quick to blame the region's discontent upon Iranian machinations. In so doing, those monarchs play upon Western government's trepidation of Tehran's influence growing across the Middle East generally and within the oil-rich Persian Gulf specifically. They draw upon a hackneyed Sunni ruling-class narrative of Shiites as fanatical, violent, and duplicitous. Likewise, well aware of Europeans' and Americans' fear that Sunni masses too are easily swayed by fundamentalism, the royals recycle yet another well-worn theme — a heavy hand over their own citizens is necessary to ensure stability.[5]

So when Bahrain's Shiite majority began demanding their fair share of political, social, and economic representation, Washington stood alongside the Khalifa ruling family despite its hailing from the country's Sunni minority. U.S. Naval Support Bahrain, encompassing the Naval Forces Central Command and the Fifth Fleet, remained on the island as a vivid demonstration of Washington's re-found commitment to and strategic interest in preserving the status quo. The U.S. administration also muted its censure of brutal crackdowns both by the monarchy there and by interventionist armed forces from Saudi Arabia.[6]

Seeing American trepidation at changes in the status quo, new and old incumbents in places like Cairo, Riyadh, and Manama lash back at demonstrators instead of instituting meaningful reforms in their own nations.[7] But rather than snuffing protests, violence by regimes finds reply with more acrimony, gunfire, Molotov cocktails, and hardening of demands for change. At each stage, the Arab ruling classes' responses have become harsher — from a military high-command's crackdown in Egypt to curfews in eastern Saudi Arabia and show trials in Bahrain.

Simultaneously, allegations of the Iranian government's hidden hand trying to manipulate events and therefore necessitating neutralization grow more frequent. So the Saudi monarchy, its own totalitarianism notwithstanding, is pushing for regime change not only in Iran but in Tehran's Damascene ally too.[8] The rise of Prince Nayef, the

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Interior Minister who spearheads Sunni hegemony over Shiites in the Arab sphere of the Gulf, to the rank of Saudi royal heir could herald further confrontation with Iran. The same applies to the religiously-conservative Prince Salman, a staunch advocate of fiercely protecting the monarchy, who is the new Defense Minister. Plans for a U.S. troop buildup in Kuwait, yet another Sunni Arab monarchy where a large Shiite minority wants its appropriate share, are seen in the region as directed at shoring up allies while threatening Iran.[9]

However, beyond the self-serving excuses of Arab royals, Iran's role is not ubiquitous. Sunni rulers may not be able to hold the line against change because the dissatisfaction fueling protest is homebred. Only 20 percent of citizens in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are employed and many among those populations, whose mean age is under 30 years, find their work unfulfilling. Bahrain's Shiite youth believe they represent the latest generation in over two hundred years of Sunni oppression on the island nation. Post-revolutionary Egypt is in economic doldrums too.[10] So Tehran is only fanning the flames of existing and deepening discontent in the Arab Middle East.

Even the Iranian mullahs' limited role to date need not expand further. So far no country in turmoil has a majority demanding the institution of Sunni or Shiite versions of Iran's velayat-e faqih or governance by a supreme Muslim jurist. Indeed, despite its constant overtures, the Islamic Republic of Iran's repute has fallen steadily among Arab masses according to polls conducted across the Middle East in 2011.[11] News reports and the internet have ensured Arabs are well aware of the ayatollahs' hypocrisy in championing change abroad while stifling it at home. Consequently, many Arabs have no desire to replace autocratic presidents and kings with equally tyrannical clergymen.

Yet most of the Middle East's Arab citizens – irrespective of their affiliations to the Sunni and Shiite sects of Islam or to other faiths like Christianity – also believe they are oppressed by leaders who, with the exception of those in Syria, are supported by the U.S. and E.U. and are pro-Western politically for personal benefit.[12] So Tehran's biggest asset among subjugated masses remains its anti-monarchist and anti-Western words and deeds. As Arabs in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt begin to rebuild their polities, and their compatriots in the Arabian Peninsula seek meaningful reform, Iran's ayatollahs will continue to point to Washington, London, Paris, and Jerusalem as opposing real change.[13]

The Arab Spring is an ongoing process. Fearing its consequences is understandable for the current world order is changing in the Middle East. However, resisting it may prove not only futile but counter-productive. Arab societies need to develop civil and civic institutions, currently vestigial or nonexistent due to totalitarianism and in some cases civil war, which can guide change to the benefit of all – not only Arabs themselves but also Americans, Europeans, and Israelis – over the long term.

Consequently it is in the interest of the U.S. and E.U. to redouble efforts at assisting moderate Arabs in building political and societal institutions which are not only truly inclusive but also economically beneficial to a broad swath of people. If presently nascent civil societies of the Middle East succeed, they will demonstrate that multireligious, multiethnic, representational, governance systems can function effectively in the region. Only then will Arabs become immunized to militant Islamic fundamentalism of both the Iranian and Arab strains.

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