

Iran, the Arab Street and Avoiding a Military Strike

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STEPHEN ELLIS, MAY 31 2013

A central and longstanding goal of Iran's foreign policy has been to increase its popularity and influence with the surrounding Arab populations, the so-called 'Arab street'. During the 1980s and 1990s Iran enjoyed only limited success in advancing this 'Arab street' policy. However, in the aftermath of the Iraq War, an emboldened Iran was able to capture the support of most of the Arab street primarily through its increased backing of Palestinian rejectionist groups and Hezbollah and through its strong opposition to the United States.[1]

Capturing the support of the Arab street generated a number of important strategic benefits for the Islamic Republic; including providing Tehran with invaluable leverage in its dealings with the region's Sunni Arab governments, who were increasingly threatened by Iran's growing popularity amongst their own populations.[2] However, since the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011, Tehran has seen its popularity and influence on the Arab street significantly erode, with this serving to weaken Iran's overall strategic position

Diminished and diminishing support for Iran on the Arab Street, and the resulting weakening of Tehran's strategic position, provides a further compelling rationale for why Israel and/or the United States must refrain from undertaking a military strike against Iran's nuclear programme. As a military strike by Israel and/or the United States could, potentially, provide Iran with a valuable opportunity to recapture some of its standing on the Arab street, by allowing Tehran to demonstrate its anti-Israeli and anti-American credentials. Furthermore, increased support for Iran on the Arab street would also likely create significant internal difficulties for the region's pro-Western Arab governments.

Background: Iran and the Arab Street

The Iranian revolution and the emergence of theocratic leadership in Tehran resulted in a considerable shift in Iranian foreign policy both in terms of tactics and objectives. Central to this shift has been the Islamic Republic's core objective of spreading and deepening its popularity and influence with the repressed Arab populations of the Middle East. Tehran's motivation for reaching out to the Arab street can be seen as being driven by a combination of ideological outlook and strategic calculation.

Ideologically, a core underpinning principal of the Islamic Republic has been its commitment to exporting the Revolution and its ideals across the Islamic world.[3] Tehran's ideological commitment towards the Arab street has also made strong strategic sense.[4] The emergence of the Islamic Republic was greeted with a mixture of alarm and hostility by the neighbouring Arab governments, who sought to contain, isolate and eventually destroy it. This was most clearly demonstrated by the near universal support from the Arab states for Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980.[5] In order to counteract this hostility therefore, Iran has long sought to build up its popularity and influence internally within the surrounding Arab states; ideally to ferment revolution or at least to make it more difficult for those regimes to be overtly hostile to the Islamic Republic.[6]

During the 1980s this policy of reaching out to the Arab street can be seen to have had mixed success. The Islamic Republic, and particularly its leader Ayatollah Khomeini, certainly enjoyed strong support amongst disenfranchised Arabs, whether Sunni or Shia.[7] Iran's 'resistance' against the United States through the taking of American hostages, along with Tehran's staunch rejection of Israel and embrace of Palestinian nationalism greatly aided Iran's outreach to the Arab street.[8]

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However, despite these developments, Iran's Arab street policy also suffered many failures and frustrations as the 1980s wore on. In particular, there were no further Islamic revolutions or even serious unrest in the Persian Gulf. Often Tehran's appeals to the Arab street on the grounds of Islamic unity were undercut by the strong existence of Arab nationalism. Even Iraq's long oppressed Shiites did not side with their Iranian co-religionists during the Iran-Iraq War – as had been hoped by Tehran – but instead remained loyal to Baghdad.[9]

Recognising the limits of its Arab street policy, and facing hostility and containment from Arab governments and the United States, under presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami Iran placed less emphasis on winning over the Arab street, and instead focused on improving relations with the region's governments and the United States.[10] This was most clearly evident with the restoring of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in 1991.

Capturing the Arab Street

Despite seeking to improve relations at the inter-governmental level during the 1990s, Iran never entirely abandoned its efforts to cultivate popularity and influence on the Arab street and this policy once again began to take on greater importance beginning in the mid-2000s. Overt hostility from the Bush administration, growing US difficulties in Iraq and the replacement of Khatami with the more 'hawkish' Ahmadinejad, all served to reignite Iranian ambitions to win over the Arab street.

Ironically it was US foreign policy toward Iraq that initially did the most to advance Iran's Arab street policy. The US removed Saddam Hussein's government – a longstanding foe of Iran – but failed to secure Iraq's political future, and into the resulting power vacuum and chaos stepped Iran. Tehran had longstanding ties with many Iraqi groups and was able to use this influence to help shape Iraq's political direction to Iran's advantage.[11]

As US difficulties in Iraq mounted, particularly from 2005 to 2007, Iran's influence in the country was only increasing. Iran was able to create a strong working relationship with the Iraqi government of Nouri al-Maliki, but also had close contact and influence with a number of influential groups below the governmental level, including most notably the powerful Mahdi Army led by Muqtada al-Sadr.[12]

As well as deepening its contacts and influence in post-Saddam Iraq, Iran was emboldened by US difficulties in the country to dramatically step up its support for Palestinian rejectionist groups and Hezbollah.[13] In particular, with Syria as the conduit, Iran substantially increased its military support for Hezbollah.[14] In 2006 this policy paid significant dividends for Iran in efforts to win the support of the Arab street, as Iranian backed Hezbollah was widely perceived in the Arab world to have won a stunning and historic victory over Israel.[15]

Hezbollah's perceived victory over Israel greatly boosted the popularity of the organisation and Iran across the Middle East. One RAND study argued that from the viewpoint of Saudi Arabia, the conflict represented 'an almost seismic shift in the regional balance of power in Iran's favour'.[16] Certainly in the aftermath of the conflict, polling data indicated that amongst Arab publics Hassan Nasrallah – the head of Hezbollah – and President Ahmadinejad were overwhelmingly the two most popular political figures.[17] Meanwhile Iran and Hezbollah's ally, President Assad of Syria, was confident enough to taunt and chastise the leaders of the Sunni Arab states for being 'half-men' for their failure to confront Israel.[18] During this period, the 'axis of resistance' of Iran, Syria and Hezbollah was very much in the ascendancy.

The 'axis of resistance' was able to claim a further success in late 2008, when Hamas – supplied with arms by Iran and Syria – clashed with Israel in Gaza.[19] The sight of Iranian supplied missiles being launched at Israel by Hamas reinforced the image on the Arab street of Iran as the true champion of the Palestinians. Much like after the Israeli-Hezbollah War of 2006, Iran's standing on the Arab street was strengthened as a result of its embrace of hard-line rejectionist groups.

Iran's influence and popularity with the region's Arab populations made it increasingly difficult for the Sunni Arab governments to overtly and comprehensibly balance against Iran. In fact, in response to Iran's popularity and

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influence amongst their own populations, the region's Arab governments did not try to rollback Iranian influence but instead largely accepted and accommodated it in a number of areas critical across the Middle East, particularly in Lebanon, the Palestinian territories and Iraq.[20]

Furthermore, through its staunch support of the Palestinians and Hezbollah, Iran was also able to generate considerable goodwill and support for its nuclear programme amongst Arab publics. Indeed whilst their government's considered Iran's nuclear programme to present a significant threat, Arab publics consistently viewed the programme as non-threatening and as presenting a welcome challenge to American regional dominance and Israel's nuclear monopoly.[21] Consequently, such support for Iran's nuclear programme on the Arab street, made it often impossible for Arab governments to overtly join international efforts aimed at thwarting Iran's nuclear ambitions.[22] As this demonstrates, in a number of important ways Iran's outreach to the Arab street was producing very real and significant strategic gains for Tehran during this period.

Losing the Street

However, although Iran's influence and popularity on the Arab street during this period was significant and real, it has also proven fragile and reversible. Indeed, since the outbreak of the tumultuous events of the Arab Spring, and particularly the emergence of civil war in Syria, Tehran's standing amongst Arab populations has diminished considerably.

Tehran had initially welcomed the advent of the Arab Spring. Iran's Sunni Arab rivals were placed on the defensive as they were plunged into domestic unrest. In the case of Egypt, the overthrow of President Mubarak was strategically beneficial for Iran. Mubarak had long been an opponent of Iran and had consistently sought to block Iranian involvement in Arab affairs. In contrast Mubarak's replacement, President Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, has reached out to Iran, resulting in an unprecedented 'warming' of relations between Cairo and Tehran.[23]

However, whilst the Arab Spring has produced certain strategic benefits for Iran, it has also served to gravely weaken and undermine Iran's Arab street policy. The Islamic Republic has long appealed to the Arab street by positioning itself as the champion of the repressed; however since the Arab Spring other actors have increasingly sought to take up this role. Qatar in particular, through its actions in the Palestinian territories, Egypt, Libya and Syria, has increasingly sought to do this.[24] Equally, Turkey under Prime Minister Erdogan and Egypt under President Morsi, have increasingly taken a more active and supportive approach to the Palestinian cause.[25] Although Iran ostensibly welcomes their involvement, in reality Tehran is concerned that their policies are undermining Iran's influence and damaging its long cultivated role as the true champion of the Palestinians.

Yet, whilst these developments have been troubling for Iran, it has been the conflict in Syria which has been most damaging to Iran's play for the Arab street. As the Assad government responded to widespread protests with a brutal crackdown, Iran was faced with a critical strategic choice of whether to continue to back the Assad government or not. The Iranian leadership was likely aware of the negative repercussions supporting Assad would have on Iran's standing on the Arab street, but there was a strong belief that the Assad government was a critical strategic ally that needed to be supported and that the Assad government would prevail.

As a result, Iran has been providing the Assad government with vital military, diplomatic and political support throughout the two-year uprising.[26] Supporting the Assad government has, however, inevitably done considerable damage to Iran's reputation on the Arab street. Not only is Iran now seen in the Arab world as actively supporting a brutal dictator in the slaying of his own people, but the Syrian conflict has also increasingly taken on a sectarian nature with largely Alawite government forces battling Sunni insurgents.[27] This framing of the conflict in Syria as sectarian conflict (accurate or not) is deeply troubling for Iran, as the Islamic Republic has long sought to avoid itself being portrayed as a sectarian Shiite actor in order to have influence and support in the overwhelming Sunni Arab world.

The conflict in Syria has also had negative implications for Iran's relationship with Hamas. Faced with the same choice as Iran, Hamas opted to end its relationship with the Assad government.[28] This has led to a straining in the

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Tehran-Gaza relationship. Although Hamas and Iran continue to cooperate, Iran has begun to intensify its contacts with other Palestinian groups whilst Hamas has increasingly looked toward Cairo for a new strategic relationship.[29] If going forward the conflict in Syria results in a long term loss of Iranian involvement and influence with Hamas, this will be a considerable setback for Iran's Arab street policy, as supporting Hamas has been a central way in which Iran has sought to generate support and goodwill in Arab lands.

Even more critically for Tehran, the conflict in Syria has also undermined Iran's Arab street policy with regard to Hezbollah. Although the Iran-Hezbollah relationship has proven strong and durable, Hezbollah's value as an asset to Iran has been damaged by the organisation's support for the Assad government. Indeed whilst Iran has kept a militarily low key presence in Syria, Hezbollah military units have been actively fighting alongside government forces.[30] This has led to a collapse of support for the organisation on the Arab street since 2011. This is a serious setback for Iran's outreach to the Arab street, as Iran's relationship with Hezbollah has traditionally been a key way through which Tehran has built support and influence amongst Arab populations.

Avoiding a Military Strike

The dramatic erosion of Iran's base of support in the Arab world brought about by the Arab Spring and particularly the conflict in Syria, has been highly beneficial for the region's Sunni Arab governments, Israel and the United States. Iran's popularity on the Arab street had bestowed on Tehran considerable strategic benefits. Not least, it gave the Islamic Republic invaluable leverage in its dealings with the region's Sunni Arab governments and meant that they had to accept growing Iranian involvement and influence in a number of critical areas across the Middle East. However more recently, Tehran's ability to pressure the Sunni Arab governments by appealing to the Arab street has largely disappeared due to Iran and Hezbollah's active support of the Assad government in Syria.

In fact, with the loss of support from the region's Arab populations, Iran is now increasingly heading toward a position of relative isolation given its poor relations with the region's Sunni Arab governments and the fact that its only two Arab allies – the al-Maliki government in Iraq and the Assad government in Syria – are weak regional actors facing considerable internal difficulties.

Thus the current strategic outlook for Tehran is extremely challenging, with Iran facing growing isolation across the region at both the inter-governmental and grassroots levels. As a result, it is critical that Israel and the United States avoid any action that may reverse Iran's collapsing support on the Arab street. To this end avoiding an Israeli or US military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities is paramount.

Not only is engaging in a strike a dubious proposition in terms of the likelihood of it being able to destroy or setback Iran's nuclear ambitions, but any military action against Iran would also likely lead to the Islamic Republic recovering some of its standing on the Arab street. It has been widely commented that the Iranian government may in fact welcome military action against its nuclear programme as a way of rallying support domestically[31], with a similar development likely to occur on the Arab street as well. Tehran would once again be able to present itself as the lead state resisting American imperialism and Israeli aggression in the region. Furthermore, a military strike – and any retaliatory action by Iran or Hezbollah – is also likely to distract regional attention away from Syria and Iran's involvement there.

A military strike by Israel or the United States – and any subsequent boost to Iran's popularity in the Arab world – could also have critical domestic repercussions for the region's pro-Western Sunni Arab governments, especially given that many of them are already facing significant unrest as a result of the Arab Spring. Although in the event of a military strike it would be expected that the Sunni Arab governments would condemn any military action against Iran, their close ties to the United States and their inability or unwillingness to challenge Israel (in stark contrast to Iran) is likely to make them extremely vulnerable to domestic unrest or pressure.

Indeed, if Iran's regional popularity were to rebound in the aftermath of a military strike and the region's Sunni Arab governments were faced with growing unrest, this is likely to have significant consequences for the regional order and balance of power to the benefit of Tehran. In particular, Iran's leverage over the Sunni Arab governments could

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be restored to at least a certain extent. This could potentially lead to Iran pursuing more ambitious and destabilising regional objectives and would also mean that the willingness and capability of the Sunni Arab governments to balance against Iran would again be reduced.

Conclusion

Currently the Iranian government is facing its most challenging strategic outlook since the 1980s. Unpopular domestically and facing international economic sanctions, the regime is confronted with hostility from the surrounding Sunni Arab governments and lacks valuable regional allies. Meanwhile, its influence in Palestinian affairs is reducing and its greatest asset in the Arab world – Hezbollah – is now considerably tarnished. Widely feted on the Arab street in recent years, today the Islamic Republic is increasingly held in contempt largely due to its alliance with the crumbling Assad government in Syria.

Clearly the regime in Tehran is in need of a 'game changer' to alter this grim strategic outlook and it is vital that Israel or the United States do not provide one. Thus, Iran's plummeting popularity on the Arab street and its resulting isolation provides a further clear and compelling reason why Washington and Jerusalem must continue to choose diplomacy over war with Iran.

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