

Thirty years on: The Iranian revolution and its impact on the region

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AFSHIN SHAHI, FEB 14 2009

Over the last thirty years, political Islam has been at the centre stage of the Middle Eastern politics. Indeed, not only has political Islam been a cause for social mobilisation, it has acted as an agency for the radicalisation of the marginalised people throughout the region. Even beyond the boundaries of the Middle East, the voice of political Islam has been heard. Many events from the protests against Salman Rushdi to the tragic bombings of July 7th have been explained in the context of political Islam. At the time, that Tehran is celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, one should look back to assess the legacies of a social phenomenon that arguably put Islam into the forefront of politics.

Indeed the Iranian revolution was the point of realisation for the immense political potential of Islam in modern times. The demonstration of the political capacity of Islam by the Iranian revolution militarised the regional political culture, this resulted in further instability in the region. The activist movements either with a political or with a religious agenda now were convinced that with Islam they have the winning card, it can be employed as a potent political mechanism to, politicize, mobilise, radicalise the masses in order to confront the authoritarian states across the Middle East. The voice of the Iranian revolution was heard across the world from an early stage and particularly alarmed the countries with the substantial Muslim minorities. The political foundations of the neighbouring countries were shaken especially of those who had significant Shiite population, namely, Saudi, Kuwait, Bahrain and Iraq.

Only a short while after the triumph of the Islamic Revolution, on November 20, 1979, a date, which marked the start of the Islamic fifteenth century, 400 well-armed Islamist took control of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the holiest site within the entire Islamic world. That unprecedented event shaken the authorities in Saudi, It took them more than two weeks to regain control of the Mosque. In that process, according to official sources 127 troops, 25 pilgrims and 117 rebels were killed.

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On 27th of the same month 400,000 strong Shiite minority concentrated in the oil-rich region of al-Hasa , broke the long establish ban on Ashura. (Ashura is the most secret event of Shiite calendar which celebrates the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, a defining figure in the Shiite faith)

To the horror of the Saudi establishment, the Ashura's processions turned into a pro- Khomeini demonstrations in eight strategically important towns in the oil rich region.

20,000 security forces were employed by the authorities to confront the rebels and regain control of the region.

However, the sporadic demonstrations by Shiite militate continued for the next two month.

Khomeini regarded the Persian Gulf rulers as corrupt men who fostered what he called "American Islam" or "Golden Islam". He strongly criticised their policy of reducing the valuable natural resources of their country in order to satisfy the US, whom he described as the "Great Satan, the number one source of corruption on earth"

Despite the extreme censorship of the Persian Gulf state's media in covering the revolution, the inflammatory speeches were heard across the region. The wind of Iranian revolution was now on the air in every country in the Middle East. Bahrain and Iraq with substantial Shiite majorities were particularly threatened by the ideas from across the border, which at any time could trigger a Shiite insurrection.

Khomeini was calling on the export of revolution, confrontation with the "Grate Satan" and the liberation of occupied territories. In order to demonstrate the revolution as an Islamic one rather than an Iranian one, he engaged himself with the Issues close to the hearts and minds of Arabs, namely the question of Palestine and Pan-Islamism. Although, the Iranian revolution did not lead in the establishment of Pax Islamica, it formed a new Islamic paradigm, which is increasingly radicalising dissatisfied Muslim communities who are desperate for change.

The question arises here, whether this new Islamic paradigm would emerge anyway, without the success of the Iranian revolution in 1979. Given the extreme level of dissatisfaction, arbitrary governance, widening social divisions, the lack of any political platform for a dialogue between the governors and the governed and the failure of secular discourses, the answer very likely would be yes.

However, this argument cannot reduce the importance of 1979 as the year that changed the modern Middle East. Even though the existing conditions in the region would make the emergence of political Islam inevitable; nevertheless, the Iranian revolution intensified and radicalised the process, which was slowly gaining momentum.

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The Iranian revolution for the first time in recent history set a precedent for the immense political potential, mobilising capacity and unifying capability of religion in the region that all other political agencies were repressed by dictatorship. Of course, the Iranian revolution reinvigorated political Islam, but at the same time it created more division among the leaders in the Islamic world. From the very early stage, the Sunni politicians expressed their distrust of the emerging Shiite order in Iran. This view was classically represented by King Abdullah of Jordan in an interview with The London Times in January 26, 1982. Where he referred to the Iranian Revolution and stated that: "we are facing the most difficult time that I ever witnessed in this region of the world. The threat of Zionism is not any greater than threat of Shiite fundamentalism".

That statement was not an isolated view in the region and soon majority of the Muslim leaders except Hafiz Al-Asad of Syria, supported Iraq and perpetuated the eight-year long war against Iran. Political disagreement was nothing new between Iran and its Arab neighbours. Nonetheless, after the revolution the political differences were articulated with a religious tone. Of course, the main question has been geopolitics and the balance of power, as Arab leaders have been cynical about the Iranian penetration in countries such as Lebanon and Iraq with significant Shiite population. Currently, they not only concerned about Shiite alliances, they have been also distrustful of Iranian ties with other militant sunny organisations such as Hamas.

Although, most of the governments in the Arab world distrust the Islamic Republic, it seems Iran is winning the battle of hearts and mind in the Arab streets.

While I was living in Egypt and travelling in the region, I was surprised to notice that there was much admiration for the Iranian revolution among ordinary people. Many people seemed to be inspired by the Islamic Revolution, advocating that Islam is the only way to liberate the region from the entrenched authoritarianism. They were frustrated with the weakness of their own leaders and resented their subordination to the US. It seemed that many people were impressed by the hard-line rhetoric of some Iranian leaders against the West. Ahmadinejad's harsh statements against the Jewish State reinvigorated them. In absence of any other mobilising agencies to address the democratic deficit, people seemed to fantasise and idealise about a revolution that made Islam applicable to every dimension of life in Iran. They wanted to see the same thing happen in their own countries. They wanted an Islamic solution to their profound problems. What cannot be denied here, rightly or wrongly, the Islamic Revolution has created a new model that inspires many people in the region for change. This only manifest that, if the process of creating platforms for dialogues between the rulers and the ruled does not take off in the region, the increasing dominance of Islamic fundamentalism will be very likely if not inevitable. It is in the realms of possibility that could lead to the replication of Islamic revolution in many countries across the region.

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