

The Arab Spring and the Future of Iran-US Relations

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MOHAMMAD REZA KIANI, JUN 5 2011

Since Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory in the 2005 presidential elections, there has been a dramatic change in Iranian foreign policy behavior in the Middle East and beyond. In speeches and policies made by Iranian elites, one can detect a pervading impression that Iran is a resurgent power. According to one interpretation, everything that has happened since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 has led to the empowerment of Iran. The removal of Taliban from power in 2001 and unrelenting demise of pre-invasion Iraq made Iran more influential as Iraq could no longer offer a counter-balance to Iranian power in the Persian Gulf. Furthermore, the Hamas victory in the Palestinian elections of 2006 and relative successes of Hezbollah over Israel in the July war of 2006 provided Iran with real opportunities within the region, gave it a resonant voice beyond its military capabilities and beyond its territories. (1) However, the US presence and influence in Iran's neighborhood following 9/11 raised deep concerns among Iranian hardliners who harbor a general perception that Iran is now surrounded by an American-controlled Iraq to the west and an American-controlled Afghanistan to the east; thereby posing significant challenges to Iranian security and territorial integrity.

Given these changes, after the 2005 Iranian presidential election and the victory of Ahmadinejad, Iran tried to seek hegemony over its Arab neighbors and a position of greater power vis-a-vis the US and its allies in the Middle East by increasing its multifaceted activities in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon as well as Syria. Placed in such a context, the Arab revolts and the resultant unprecedented transformations in the Middle East will most probably fan the flames of serious conflict, and exert a negative impact on mutual (non-)relations between America and Iran – which have already deteriorated following the ascendancy of Ahmadinejad and his neo-conservative coterie in the Islamic Republic – as it now harbors hopes of utilizing the Arab Spring to secure a heightened regional role. (2)

New developments in the region as a result of the Arab Spring provide Iran with new opportunities and new challenges. The collapse of Mubarak as a consequence of Egyptian protests was a miraculous blessing for Iran, as since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Iran-Egypt relations have been on a collision course. When the Shah fell, Egypt fell out of favor in Tehran, as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's anti-Israel mantra sat at odds with the peace treaty Egypt had signed with Israel at Camp David in 1978. Additionally, Anwar Sadat, then Egyptian president, infuriated the new Iranian establishment by welcoming Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the exiled Shah of Iran, for a short but indefinite stay in 1979 resulting in Iran officially cutting all ties with Egypt. (3) Since then, mutual efforts for normalization of relations have found no willing audience and have not been able to come into fruition. The general perception among Egyptian authorities under the Hosni Mubarak regime was that Iran was a long-term challenge facing Egypt, and such suspicions as fears that the Iranian regime was running agents inside Egypt in an effort to subvert the regime reinforced Egyptian reticence. (4)

After recent protests in Egypt led to a populist revolution, Iran was quick to respond as the Islamic Republic's leaders watched the incident with unconcealed delight. Iran embraced the protests, proclaiming that an Islamic awakening was underway, and thus have moved to characterize the turmoil as a serious defeat for the United States and Israel, both strategic allies of the deposed Mubarak. Recently, the Iranian foreign ministry confirmed that it has taken measures to appoint Iran's first ambassador to Cairo since 1980. "We are ready to take steps" the foreign ministry spokesman, Ramin Mehmanparast, said, adding "we believe that developing relations between Iran and Egypt are in the interest of both countries and the region." Similarly, the new Egyptian foreign ministry spokeswoman, Menha Bakhom, has stated that, "[w]e are prepared to take a different view of Iran. The former regime used to see Iran as

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an enemy, but we don't." Egypt and Iran are preparing to resume diplomatic relations and appoint ambassadors to end 30 years of hostility.(5) This will spark further tension between the Islamic Republic and the US as the Obama administration seeks to limit Iran's power and influence in the Middle East and sees the newly unfolding Iranian-Egyptian scenario as an important facilitator of Tehran's regional ambitions.

Regarding popular protests in Bahrain, Iran strives to increase its influence in the Persian Gulf country as it has strongly condemned and criticized the crackdown of Shiite demonstrators by Bahrain's ruling al-Khalifa family. This goes back in part to the fact that the Islamic Republic tries to present itself as a regional heavyweight that should act as a protector of fellow Shiites in the embattled country. (6) Along these lines, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, head of Iran's ultra-conservative Guardian Council, proclaimed that, "[a]ll Islamic intellectuals are now called upon to act. All Islamic countries, as long as they're not themselves involved in the crime, bear responsibility to support the Bahrainis in their fight." In a similar vein, the Foreign Policy and National Security Commission of the Iranian Parliament (Majlis) issued a statement in support of the Bahraini protestors, holding the US accountable and calling on its regional allies, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, to leave Bahrain immediately. The document read; "The oppressed people of Bahrain are a part of the Islamic world and the Islamic Republic of Iran feels obligated to support them". (7) The king of Bahrain, Hamad ibn Isa Al Khalifa, has blamed a foreign plot for his nation's unrest, using veiled language to accuse Iran of fomenting an uprising by the Shiite majority in the Sunni-ruled island kingdom.(8) For its part, the United States has condemned Iran's subversive interference in Bahrain and voiced concerns about its potentially material and logistical support of revolutionaries.

Unlike Egypt and Bahrain, Iran is viewing the increasing turmoil in Syria with significant alarm. Syria's president Bashar al-Assad has been Iran's closest Arab friend, providing a gateway for Iran into the Arab world, and promoting the Islamic Republic's crucial ties with Lebanese Hizbullah and Palestinian groups. The spread of the unrest in Syria, Iran's strategic ally, highlights the risks presented by the new regional situation. According to Iranian officials, any change in Syria poses significant challenges to Iran's national security and is at odd with its interests. As one Arab official said, "[i]f the regime of Bashar al-Assad [Syria's president] falls, any successor will ... be less accommodating to Iran." (9) Some conservative media outlets in Tehran now claim that western countries and Saudi Arabia are behind a plot to overthrow Assad. The US has charged that the Revolutionary Guards are involved in the repression of dissidents in Syria, an allegation denied by Damascus and Tehran.

With respect to recent changes in the Middle East and North Africa, little has changed regarding the deep American-Iranian distrust that lies at the heart of their relationship, and has done for decades. With respect to the former, the resultant transformations will most probably exacerbate areas of conflicting interests between Iran and the US, as the regional designs and aspirations of both nations are deeply antithetical. When adding Iran's controversial nuclear program and the grave threat perception of Israel to this amalgam, one may argue that the prospect of a violent conflict is looming large on the horizon.

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Notes

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4. Ronen Bergman "Iran, Israel and the Arab Contradiction," *Wall Street Journal*, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704457604576011643624083766.html> (accessed May 16, 2010).
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7. "Iran lawmakers support Bahrain protests," *Press TV*, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/170743.html> (accessed April 15, 2011).
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