

# Democracy and Reform in the Middle East and Asia

## Social Protest and Authoritarian Rule after the Arab Spring

Edited by Amin Saikal  
and Amitav Acharya

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Founded in 1850, both the first and the second editions of the book explore the conditions of Africa that have led to the book's exploration of the process of transition, both their similarities and differences, and the role of groups and individuals in the transition to semi-authoritarianism.

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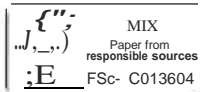
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- 24 See International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Uncertain Future: Elections and Beyond*, Middle East Report No. 94, International Crisis Group, 25 February 2010; Abbas Kadhiri, 'Iraq's quest for democracy amid massive corruption', *Arab Reform Bulletin*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 3 March 2010; and Phil Williams, *Criminals, Militias, and Insurgents: Organized Crime in Iraq*, Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2009.

## CHAPTER 5

## The Arab Revolution Is Bad News for Iran

*Shahram Akbarzadeh*

The popular revolutions that swept across the Arab world in late 2010 and 2011 were initially welcomed in Tehran as a vindication of its policies. Since its inception, the Islamic Republic of Iran had maintained a difficult relationship with its Arab neighbours, even fighting a bloody eight-year war with one. From the Iranian point of view, Arab governments had betrayed Islam by working closely with the United States and giving up on the Palestinian cause. At first glance, the Arab revolution that deposed the ruling regimes in Tunisia and Egypt and the revolt in the Gulf sheikhdoms fitted neatly in the narrative of the Iranian regime. The Arab regimes were inclined to side with the United States in all international fora and were generally criticized for not representing the interest of their own people. But this interpretation of the Arab revolution as an automatic endorsement of the Iranian worldview was too simplistic to withstand the test of time. Very soon after the removal of Hosni Mubarak from office and the spread of unrest to Syria and Libya, the Iranian interpretation came under severe strain. In Syria, the Bashar al-Assad regime, which had been hailed by the Iranian authorities as a genuine popular alternative to many other Arab states, seemed to face the same kind of popular unrest that had paralysed its neighbours. In Egypt, the Muslim brotherhood dismissed suggestions that it might follow the Iranian model. Iran's binary worldview of believers versus disbelief could not explain the momentous events that engulfed the region. The Arab revolution presented a conceptual challenge to the Iranian worldview. This has reminded the leadership of the tenuous nature of their hold on power. The regime has responded by doubling security measures against its internal opposition, dubbed the Green Movement. Only a

year after the regime managed to suppress its own opposition rallies, the Arab revolution has made it vulnerable once again.

This chapter begins with a survey of the Iranian position with regard to the Arab revolution, and then explores the impact of the Bahrain and Syrian conflicts on Iran's standing in the region. It argues that the double standard in relation to these conflicts has eroded Iran's soft power on the Arab streets and led to its marginalization. The chapter concludes with an assessment of the internal implications of this strategic demise as the regime feels pressured from within and without.

### Welcoming the Arab Revolution

The initial Iranian response to the Arab revolution was predictable. The revolution was presented as an Islamic awakening, following Iran's footsteps. Not only was the Arab revolution seen as a vindication of the ruling ideology in Iran, it was also presented as evidence of Iran's leadership in the region. Iran had constructed an identity of Islamic and revolutionary defiance for itself, making itself unique among other regional governments for challenging the United States and Israel. It was no secret that the Iranian regime saw itself as a regional leader. The Arab revolution was an opportunity for the regime to re-state that claim, sometimes in a rather patronizing fashion.

There was a unanimous view in the Iranian leadership that the Arab revolution was the 'aftershock' of the 1979 revolution in Iran. Addressing a Friday prayer congregation on 4 February 2011, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei argued that:

a powerful cry is being clearly heard today in various regions of the Muslim world. Today's event in the north of Africa, in Egypt and Tunisia and certain other countries, ... has a special meaning ... This is the very same thing that has always been regarded as Islamic awakening on the occasion of the triumph of the great Islamic Revolution of the nation of Iran. Today, it is manifesting itself [in the Arab world] ... Our revolution became an inspiration and role model and this was due to . . . resoluteness towards the main ideals, which this revolution announced via the imam [Ayatollah Khomeini]. The

nation has turned to a role model and you are witnessing the signs of this fact today .... Today, the reverberation of your voice is being heard in Egypt.<sup>1</sup>

In a subsequent speech (22 March 2011), Khamenei stated that the same principles and ideas that had been upheld in the Islamic regime of Iran were now prompting the Arab people into action.

The theme of Iran as the role model was echoed by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and other members of the Islamic regime. For Ahmadinejad there was no question that the 'Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings were inspired by Iran's 'defiance' against western powers.' In a rather patronizing speech, Ahmadinejad praised the Arab world for striving to 'catch up' with Iran. In a clear effort to capitalize on the events, the Iranian regime convened a two-day conference in September 2011 under the rubric of Islamic Awakening. The official Iranian news agency reported that 700 scholars and dignitaries from 80 countries took part in this international event. Some of the key participants included leaders of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Lebanese Hizbullah and the late former president of Afghanistan, Burhanuddin Rabbani. This conference was opened by the Iranian Supreme Leader and included addresses by the Iranian President and the Speaker of the Parliament, all of whom emphasized the Islamic character of the Arab uprising and Iran's leading role in this Islamic Awakening.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, the Iranian leadership also exhibited an awareness that its point of view is not shared in the region and warned against efforts to derail the revolution. In the words of the Iranian ambassador to Algeria, Muhammad Mohammadi, 'as the Islamic Awakening spreads around the world, the western efforts aimed at deviating it also increase. Indeed, the Iranian account of the Arab revolution as an Islamic Awakening that challenged pro-Western regimes started to unravel as the revolt spread to Libya and Syria. In order to contain the counter-narrative to its interpretation of the Arab revolution Iran tried to limit news of civil unrest in Libya and Syria. When this proved impossible, the Iranian news media downplayed events, and blamed Western powers for meddling in the internal affairs of the Muslim world and exaggerating the extent of unrest. This was especially highlighted in relation to Syria. As Iran's only strategic allies, the unrest in Syria proved especially troubling for the Islamic regime.

In the Iranian interpretation of the Arab revolution, anti-USA and anti-Israel states should have been the natural beneficiaries of the popular revolts. That is why the spread of anti-government revolts to Syria, with its long-standing antagonism towards Israel and difficult relationship with the United States, was so dramatically unsettling. Not only did it undermine the Islamic regime's narrative of the Arab revolt, but it reminded the leadership of a real threat on the home front – that is, the potential for the revival of the Green Movement. The Iranian leadership had a vested interest in keeping the Bashar al-Assad regime in power and did not shy away from providing diplomatic and tangible assistance to Damascus. Stakes were raised in mid-2012 when the United States commenced a diplomatic campaign to convince Russia and China to refrain from vetoing a UN Security Council vote on Syria. This prompted the Islamic regime to blast the United States for interfering in the internal affairs of an Arab state. The Iranian Fars News Agency reported on 2 July 2012 that Iran would not tolerate foreign intervention in Syria and warned against military action to topple the Assad regime.<sup>5</sup>

It is noteworthy that even some critics within the regime found it difficult to reject the narrative of the Islamic awakening. Ayatollah Akbar-Hashemi Rafsanjani, a former president who had sided with the reformist movement at the 2009 presidential elections and was subsequently removed from his post as the Head of the Expediency Council, echoed the well-rehearsed line: the Arab revolution was following the Iranian footsteps. But he tried to use the occasion to criticize the policies of the Ahmadinejad government: 'It is no exaggeration to say that the Islamic Iran's revolution has been the role model for the people of the region ... however, in our foreign policy we have acted in such a way that revolutionaries of the region are not willing to admit this fact.'<sup>6</sup>

Despite Iran's official line, there was discernable disquiet in the leadership ranks about the prospects of a contagion effect. By the end of 2010, the Iranian reform movement was showing signs of subsiding, but the Arab revolution had the potential to re-energize it. According to Iran analyst Farideh Farhi, the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt were seen by the reformists in Iran as catalysts of activism.<sup>7</sup> For the Iranian authorities this was a real threat. Fearful of the revival potential for the Green Movement, the Islamic regime took preventative measures to contain the risk. It refused permission for celebratory rallies in February 2011 and put Green Movement leaders in prison or under house arrest. On

14 February 2011 an unlicensed rally was brutally dispersed, resulting in one death.<sup>8</sup>

### The Arab Response

The claim that the Arab masses were somehow following the footsteps of the 1979 Iranian revolution was greeted with bemusement and a tinge of derision on the streets of Cairo. This was in line with the general assessment of the upheavals in the more informed policy circles. In fact many observers commented on the absence of Islam as a motivating factor for the Arab revolution. Olivier Roy, a French scholar of Islamism, had even suggested that the Arab revolution and the popular aspiration for political accountability and responsible government signalled the demise of radical Islamism, espoused most violently by al-Qaeda.<sup>9</sup> Indeed the Arab revolution was widely seen by Western observers as a vindication of democratic aspirations as a universal force, an interpretation that sat diametrically opposite Iranian claims of an Islamic Awakening.

In Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood has gained significant ground in the wake of the revolution, the sense of distancing the Egyptian experience from the Iranian model is urgent. The Muslim Brotherhood is mindful of the negative publicity it would invite should it align itself with Iran. As a result, the Brotherhood leadership has repeatedly dismissed suggestions that it is following the Iranian model and that its rising fortunes will benefit Iran. In an interview with the Voice of America, a spokesperson for the Brotherhood insisted that such claims are 'absolutely wrong.'<sup>10</sup> The Brotherhood did not pursue the establishment of Islamic theocracy *à la* Iran, he proclaimed. Instead, 'we are calling for a civil state, moderate state, a democratic state, equality, prosperity, justice for all and freedom for all citizens. All are equal. Egypt is not Iran. Egypt can build its own model of democracy according to its culture and Islamic preference'. This position was reinforced by other statements by the Brotherhood leadership. In an interview with *Spiegel* (2 July 2011), the Deputy Leader of the Brotherhood stated: 'we are not marching with our slogans. We don't want this revolution to be portrayed as a revolution of the Muslim Brothers, as an Islamic revolution. This is a popular uprising by all Egyptians.'<sup>11</sup>

With the consolidation of its position as a leading force in the future of Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood became even more categorical about its position *vis-a-vis* Iran. Following its parliamentary victory in November 2011, a newly elected Brotherhood member of parliament warned Iran that the popular uprising could also reach Iran and unsettle the Islamic regime.<sup>12</sup> This was the first time the Brotherhood drew a comparison between the Islamic regime of Iran and the deposed Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. As the conflict in Syria deteriorated and Iranian support for the Assad regime continued unabated, the Brotherhood hardened its position in solidarity with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Mohammad Farouk Tayfour, secretary-general of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood, openly referred to Iran as the 'enemy' for arming the Syrian regime.

As a long-standing political force, now a key player in the future of Egypt, the Brotherhood is clearly eager to avoid antagonizing the West unnecessarily. But the position *vis-a-vis* Iran goes beyond political expediency. The Arab world is generally suspicious of Iran's intentions and regional ambitions. A 2011 survey by the Arab American Institute Foundation documented the extent of wariness towards Iran. The survey found that 'Iran's favorable ratings have dropped significantly in recent years. Iran is seen as not contributing to "peace and stability in the Arab world" and there is scant support for Iran's nuclear program'.<sup>13</sup> This concern with the security risks posed by Iran has been exaggerated by its strategic rival, Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi government has been anxious about Iran's anti-establishment message directed at the Arab kingdoms of the Persian Gulf. Iran's claims of support for popular movements were seen in Riyadh as a ploy to undermine political stability in the region and allow Iran to pursue its territorial claims in the Gulf at best, or engineer regime change at worst. This was especially troubling in the case of Bahrain, as will be explored below. As far as the Saudi officials were concerned, Iran was clearly interfering in Arab affairs.

### Bahrain

The tiny Kingdom of Bahrain was not immune from the contagion of the Arab revolution. In early 2011 Bahrain experienced a wave of protest rallies that challenged the authority of Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al

Khalifa. The protestors were calling for political reform and responsible government but the sectarian divide in Bahrain soon gained prominence and transformed the revolt into a battle of Shi'a masses versus Sunni rulers. The Shi'a constitute about 70 per cent of the total population in Bahrain and have been indigenous to the island, while the ruling Al Khalifa family follows the Sunni sect of Islam and conquered Bahrain in the late eighteenth century. Due to the sheer size of the Shi'a population, the absence of political representation in Bahrain – which was a generic problem with monarchic rule – was widely seen by the population as deliberately targeting the Shi'a.

Given its Sunni affiliations and links with other Arab royal families, the Al Khalifa family enjoyed the support of Saudi Arabia and other sheikhdoms in the region. In contrast, Shi'a Iran has been consistently portrayed by the ruling family in Bahrain as a threat to its sovereignty. Of course Iran's behaviour provided plenty of evidence to substantiate that fear. Iran continued to repeat its territorial claims over Bahrain until 1975. The Iranian revolution and the establishment of the Islamic regime revived nostalgia for Iran's regional reach. Although Iran did not openly challenge Bahrain's sovereignty, newspaper editorials and public statements by members of parliament about Bahrain's position as an integral part of Iran reverberated throughout the region and caused serious concern about an impending policy reversal in Tehran.

Due to the above sectarian and geo-strategic factors, the 2011 uprising in Bahrain rapidly evolved into an arena for regional rivalry. After weeks of street protest, the ruling Al Khalifa requested the assistance of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in suppressing the popular uprising. Saudi security forces entered Bahrain via the King Fahd causeway on 13 March 2011 and promptly put down the revolt. The Iranian response to this move was predictable and only confirmed suspicions that Tehran was sponsoring the revolt. Iran recalled its ambassador from Bahrain in an official protest. A few months later (October 2011), the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs told Fars News Agency that Iran had no plans to return the ambassador to Bahrain.<sup>14</sup> Bahrain reciprocated and recalled its ambassador from Iran in March 2011, but reinstated the ambassador in August 2012 to resume full diplomatic relations. The Iranian authorities, however, still insisted on keeping their diplomatic relations with Bahrain in suspense. According to the state-run news agency, Press TV, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister

Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said, 'the return of Bahrain's ambassador to Tehran is the decision of the Bahraini establishment but Iran will make no decision to reinstate its ambassador to Manama as long as [the Bahraini regime's] repression of the Bahraini Muslim people continues:<sup>15</sup> The Bahrain case was seen in Iran as a vindication of its worldview and ideological stand. The intervention of US-friendly GCC troops to suppress the revolt was fodder to the Tehran propaganda machine.

The foreign intervention of Saudi, Qatari and UAE forces in Bahrain brought relations between Iran and its Arab neighbours to a new low. While Iran protested that the GCC move was a violation of the popular will in Bahrain, Arab kingdoms accused Iran of meddling in their internal affairs by sowing sectarian discord. The slump in Iran's relationship with Bahrain coincided with a legal spy charge in Kuwait which implicated Iran as the mastermind of an extensive spying network in that kingdom.<sup>16</sup> With no signs of improvement in relations between Iran and its neighbours, Shaykh Al Khalifa accused Iran of continuing to pursue territorial claims on Bahrain and urged a united Arab front to meet what he termed a 'grave threat:<sup>17</sup> This call came shortly after another major diplomatic setback.

On 11 October 2011, reports of a major security sting were reported in the US media. Two men with links to the Iranian government were arrested and charged with plotting to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States.<sup>18</sup> This was a diplomatic disaster for Iran. One of the accused was known to have links to the Quds security forces, which reports directly to the Supreme Leader. This implicated the highest office in Iran. The general tone of reports and commentary on this episode in the United States was a mix of disbelief at the clumsy nature of the plot and reaffirmation of the assessment of Iran as a destabilizing force. Robert Dreyfuss, writing for the *Tehran Bureau*, captured some of that mood when he called it a 'bizarre case', asking what could Iran hope to gain from this assassination: nothing but trouble.<sup>19</sup> More seasoned analysts were less reticent in their assessment. Martyn Indyk, a former US ambassador to Israel and now Director for Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institute, argued that this event was consistent with Iran's behaviour in the past regarding assassination and terrorist attacks on foreign soil, citing the 1996 bombing of Khobar Towers. For Indyk, this episode was a significant sign of Iran's frustration at the way the Arab revolution has marginalized Tehran.<sup>20</sup>

## Syria

The spread of the popular revolution to Syria presented the Islamic regime in Iran with a serious challenge, both in terms of ideology and geo-strategy. The Syrian revolt shattered the myth that the Arab Spring was an Islamic revolution against the West and its allies. Syria had all the credentials of an anti-Western state. It had fought a war with Israel (regarded widely in the Middle East as a US proxy) and maintained a territorial dispute with that country over the Golan Heights. It was blacklisted by the United States for its role in Lebanon and was put under economic sanctions. Syrian support for Hizbullah, which implicated the Bashar al-Assad regime in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri (February 2005), was the catalyst for an international consensus to expel Syrian troops from southern Lebanon by April that year.<sup>21</sup> This consensus included Arab states, most notably Saudi Arabia, and was seen as evidence of a Western-run conspiracy to undermine Syria. According to this narrative, Syria was as anti-USA as Iran, and should not have been affected by popular uprisings.

The cracks in the official accounts of the Arab revolution were made even more daunting for the Iranian regime as Assad's hold on power was tested by the spread of the revolt. Syria represented the only state ally for Iran in the region. Its geographical location allowed the Iranian regime direct access to southern Lebanon, a most valued logistical asset for the training and supply of the Hizbullah. The decline of Assad's authority in Syria and the descent into civil war had a major impact on Iran's access to Hizbullah. This was unacceptable to the Islamic regime in Iran. The Iranian position was categorical: the Assad regime must not fall.

The initial reaction in Iran to the unfolding events in Syria (March 2011) was one of denial. Iran's media coverage of Syria was conspicuous by its absence. But it was clear that the Iranian authorities could not simply wish away the unrest in Syria. Amid growing urgency of hourly coverage of the Syrian conflict by leading news agencies such as the BBC and Al-Jazeera, the Iranian media commenced an unashamedly partisan coverage that contradicted other international reports. According to the Iranian media, the Syrian conflict was a result of terrorist activity, funded and sponsored by Western powers. The conflict was portrayed as a Western conspiracy to topple a representative government. This

was of course the official line and was repeated continuously by state officials.<sup>22</sup>

For the Islamic regime in Iran, the continuing crisis in Syria and the prospects of Assad's fall were a major ideological and strategic threat. The decision to provide support to the embattled regime in Syria was therefore not surprising. A draft report to the UN Security Council noted Iranian military supplies were sent to Damascus to help crush the uprising, in violation of the UN ban on the export of arms.<sup>23</sup> The report also noted that arms were supplied to the rebels by Arab Kingdoms of the Gulf. This level of external interest in the Syrian case risked turning the conflict into a proxy war and made Iran even more determined to maintain the Assad regime as a bulwark against the rising Saudi influence. This, argues Mohammed Ayooob, gives the Syrian conflict a major regional edge.<sup>24</sup> As the stakes were raised and the international community became more concerned about curtailing the Iranian arms supply, the Islamic regime turned to its neighbour and utilized Iraqi airspace to continue its supply of arms to Syria.<sup>25</sup>

Iran's affiliation with the ruling Syrian regime pushed another important factor to the fore. The Assad family belongs to the minority Alawite community (following Ali bin Abi Talib, the first imam of the Shi'a sect) that is regarded as heresy by many in the Sunni community, which constitutes a majority in Syria and most of the Arab world (but not Iraq).<sup>26</sup> The wealthy ruling regimes in Saudi Arabia and its Gulf kingdoms, as well as other Arab regimes such as that of the outspoken King of Jordan, have all viewed the Syrian Alawite regime with disdain. In a major speech in December 2004, for example, King Abdullah warned of an emerging Shi'a Crescent, pointing to the political ascendancy of Shi'a-affiliated political players from Lebanon, to Syria, to Iraq and Iran.

In the past, Iran had denied the sectarian factor in its foreign policy. In fact it had made extra efforts to downplay sectarian affiliations and emphasize the unity of the Muslim *umma*. According to Suzanne Maloney, a leading scholar on Iran, this country's foreign policy experienced ebbs and flows commensurate with the change of guards, but narrow sectarianism was never a focus.<sup>27</sup> Instead, Iran promoted a revolutionary agenda of a united Muslim resistance front against unresponsive national governments and their Western backers.

Such efforts were most effective in relation to the Palestinian Hamas. Iran emerged as a major sponsor of Hamas following its take-over of

the Gaza Strip in 2007 – supplying its arsenal of rockets that threatened Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. But the Arab revolution changed the landscape dramatically. For Arab observers, Iranian foreign policy seemed to be guided by its sectarian identity. First in relation to Bahrain and then in relation to Syria, Iran sided with Shi'a players: one in opposition, one in power. This impression was a major blow to Iran's self-image as the champion of the Muslim masses against the corruption of the Western-propped ruling regimes.

Iran's unapologetic support for the Syrian regime proved to be a major strategic liability, and cost Iran dearly. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Palestinian Hamas were incensed by the Assad regime's brutality against the opposition, which included the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. The extent of the rift was highlighted by the Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, who was prepared to offend his Iranian hosts at the convention of the Non-Aligned Movement in Tehran (June 2012) by openly declaring support for the Syrian masses against the Assad regime.<sup>28</sup> This rift also marginalized Iran on the Palestinian front. The Hamas opposition to the Assad regime called into question its alignment with Iran and led to a break in the Hamas-Syria-Iran alliance that had helped it manage the Gaza Strip.<sup>29</sup> Instead Hamas turned to Egypt (now dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood), Qatar and Turkey for financial and diplomatic assistance and recognition.

#### Iran's Demise

Contrary to Iran's expectations, the Arab revolution did not strengthen the position of the Islamic regime as the leading force in the Middle East. The revolution spread throughout the region, challenging unrepresentative governments, regardless of their ideology. This was contrary to Iran's worldview that saw the popular uprising as an Islamic revolution against US-friendly states. The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and more widely the growing assertiveness of Islamists in the Arab world, did not equate with greater influence for Iran. Instead Turkey, with its own experience of adapting Islam into public life, has proved to be a much more appealing model. This model offers a fresh approach to Islam and politics, an approach that has been marginalized in the Middle East by zealous Islamists who pursued a top-down Islamization of society by



capturing the state or opportunistic rulers who used Islam to legitimize their autocratic rule. The Turkish model, which may be dubbed Muslim-democratic, mirroring the Christian-democratic tradition in Europe, proved to be most popular for the Muslim Brotherhood as it attempted to navigate its way in the uncharted post-Mubarak era. The obvious advantages of this model are manifold:

1. It makes a clear and unequivocal reference to Islam. No popular regime in the Middle East can ignore the deep connection with religion and its significance in the collective sense of identity and purpose.
2. It is equally committed to democracy as the best model of government. The Brotherhood has a long history of working within the system and, despite pressure from extremist splinter groups that challenged the legitimacy of democracy as 'man-made' (as opposed to divine Islamic law), has remained committed to operate within the boundaries of democratic rule. Critics may argue that this behaviour has more to do with pragmatism than a principled commitment – but that does not detract from the *modus operandi* of the Muslim Brotherhood.
3. It is consistent with Western expectations on the future direction of political developments in the Middle East. This is an important consideration. The Muslim Brotherhood is fully aware of the negative image associated with the Iranian model and how that could alienate significant support (or tolerance) for its growing role in the post-Mubarak era.

The growing popularity of the Muslim-democratic model in the wake of the Arab revolution attests to the limits of the Iranian model and its fading influence in the region. But what has seriously undermined Iran's retracting soft power is the widely held view in the region that it is pursuing a sectarian foreign policy. Iran's double standard in relation to the popular uprisings in Bahrain and Syria has seriously damaged its standing. Support for the minority regime of the Alawite Bashar al-Assad against the popular uprising of the Sunni masses in Syria sits in stark contrast with Iran's vehement condemnation of the Sunni Al Khalifa regime and support for the Shi'a masses. Iran had tried to avoid sectarian affiliations in its foreign policy in the past, but the Arab

revolution has forced its hand and any capital it may have accrued on the Arab streets by sponsoring the Sunni Hamas movement against Israel has rapidly evaporated.

The rise of the Muslim-democratic model, espoused in Turkey and increasingly popular in Egypt, also undermines Iran's claim to be the voice of Arab/Muslim masses in relation to Israel. Turkey has managed to gain significant traction in the Middle East for its firm, but not hostile, relations with Israel. Turkey's serious diplomatic clash with Israel over the latter's illegal treatment of the Gaza flotilla enhanced Ankara's public standing on the Arab streets. This episode, and Turkey's consistently assertive relations with Israel under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party, contradict the Iranian worldview that good relations with the United States would automatically translate into submitting to Israeli whims in the region. The dynamics of Turkey's relations with Israel is already being reproduced in Egypt as the Muslim Brotherhood consolidates its position. Egypt under the presidency of Mohammed Morsi is more than likely to take a less accommodating position in relation to Israel and follow a trajectory resembling that of Turkey. This will signify a break with the Mubarak era and undermine Iran's claim of being the sole champion of Muslim interests.

### Conclusion

The rapid demise of Iran's soft power in the Arab world has coincided with the growing salience of the sectarian divide. This is a threat to the political stability of the region. The growing prominence of the sectarian fault-line in the Arab world has the potential to fracture the popular push for democratic rule and undermine the legitimacy of the revolution. This is most evident in Bahrain where the uprising has become widely seen in the Arab world to be manipulated by Iran. The Bahrain movement for reform has suffered as a result of this association.

Iran finds itself in a lonely spot. The Arab revolution has highlighted the limits of its ideological appeal. This has internal implications for the ruling regime. The loss of its natural support-base on the Arab streets has increased tension within the regime, even though the Islamic regime has been at pains to conceal internal discord. In 2011, a dispute between

the supreme leader and the President over a ministerial appointment paralysed the government for nearly two weeks, with President Ahmadinejad boycotting all official meetings.<sup>30</sup> Tensions between the President and the supreme leader continued to fester and, in February 2012, the President was summoned to appear before the parliament and respond to a grilling set of questions about his policies. The very public nature of this high-level discord is unprecedented, something not seen since the Islamists managed to eliminate the liberal faction associated with the presidency of Abulhassan Banisadr in 1980-1.

The Arab revolution and growing internal discord also raise the prospects of the resumption of protests in Iran. It may be noted that the 2009 Green Movement in Iran was the precursor of the 2010-11 Arab revolution. The latter in turn could rejuvenate the Green Movement. The prospects of the Arab revolt engulfing Iran have indeed been noted by many observers, including the Muslim Brotherhood. This is a great concern for the Iranian leadership as it tries to maintain its grip on power. The Islamic regime is fully aware of the risks and has moved to contain the threat from within. It observed how the Arab uprising caught incumbent regimes by surprise, especially in Tunisia and Egypt. The Islamic regime is trying to avoid the same fate by keeping its guard up and repressing its internal opponents.

### Notes

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## Central Asia and the Arab Spring

### Discourses of Relevance and Threat in the Region

*Kirill Nourzhanov*

The political tumult in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 did not have a ripple effect in Central Asia. The regimes in all five former Soviet Muslim republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan had a reasonably quiet year, at least by the region's standards. The ruling elites and the population in general regarded the events of the Arab Spring as something distant, mildly disturbing, yet not immediately relevant to their daily survival.

This indifference reflected a broad consensus in Central Asian societies that strongly militated against Middle East-style popular uprisings toppling authoritarian governments. A high-ranking US Department of State official outlined its essence in a testimony before a Congress committee when he commented on the weakness of political opposition in the region and the fact that ordinary people put a premium on stability 'and are weary of the turmoil and unpredictability in recent years in neighboring Afghanistan and, to a certain extent, Kyrgyzstan'.<sup>1</sup> He was echoed by a leading Russian expert on Central Asia who wrote that 'the impact of the Arab Spring on Central Asia is extremely insignificant, and one cannot talk about the overthrow of the local regimes at all at present: adding by way of explanation: 'There are differences in the quality of societies in the Arab world on the one hand, and the Central Asian region on the other hand. The former have had access, even if to a limited extent, to the Western political culture; the latter by and large remain hostages of the Soviet epoch:Z

The Central Asian media landscape was not conducive to a vigorous public debate on the revolutionary turmoil in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt in 2011. The totalitarian regime of Turkmenistan imposed what one

