

Iran and Syria

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Articles & Testimony

Iran has been trying to claim credit for the Arab Spring uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt as being inspired by the 1979 Islamic revolution, yet the Syrian case has created the need for Iran to formulate a new narrative to explain why a genuine popular uprising was threatening its closest Arab ally.

The Islamic Republic of Iran benefited from the Arab Spring until it reached Syria, which has proven extremely untimely. Iran has been trying to claim credit for the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt as being inspired by the 1979 Islamic revolution, yet events in Syria have created the need for Iran to formulate a new narrative to explain why a genuine popular movement was threatening its closest Arab ally. The Iranian government has been divided on this issue. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has held to the line that the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings were against unjust, Western-backed rulers, and thus legitimate, while the Syrian events reflect a Zionist plot to overthrow a popular and legitimate government, one opposing Israel and America while advocating the "resistance," namely Hezbollah.

However, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his chief of staff and close advisor Esfandiar Rahim Mashai have tried to persuade the regime against prematurely celebrating the events in the Arab world. According to the President's political faction, the Arab spring in its entirety is a western plot to dupe the Muslim world, and therefore illegitimate. While Khamenei employs the term "Islamic awakening" for the Arab spring (which obviously excludes Syria) Ahmadinejad hesitates to use the same term. In a discursive shift from apocalypticism to nationalism during his second term, Ahmadinejad has highlighted Iranian national identity versus pan-Islamism and even spoken of the Iranian school of Islam as being superior over the Arab and Turkish schools of Islam. Clearly, his change of discourse toward nationalism has damaged the Islamic Republic's image as a pan-Islamic government that supports Muslims worldwide.

The unrest in Syria was also untimely because the star of Ahmadinejad is falling rapidly. Ahmadinejad's anti-Israeli statements and anti-Western gestures have gained him great admiration in Arab streets, placing him in competition

alongside other figures like Osama bin Laden and Hasan Nasrallah. Ahmadinejad's bellicose statements moved the Arab street, whose own governments were unwilling to fight Israel and the west.

In June 2009, Ahmadinejad was reelected in a controversial presidential election, followed by a series of opposition demonstrations protesting the official election results. Ahmadinejad's crass populism and proclamations as representing the Iranian people began to lose its appeal as he put down popular protests at home. Because his legitimacy is directly related to the legitimacy of the political system as a whole, Khamenei publically supported him while bashing the election's critics. Now, after two years, Khamenei has lost his trust in Ahmadinejad, who he has paid a hefty cost to maintain as president. State media and other propaganda tools beholden to Khamenei, the Majlis (parliament), and the judiciary do not hesitate to criticize Ahmadinejad or his inner circle. Without a doubt, Khamenei will weaken Ahmadinejad and Ahmadinejad will not be able to create his own independent circle of power to challenge the supreme leader.

However, Khamenei's change in position has harmed both his personal image and that of the Islamic Republic. Ahmadinejad's reelection forced Khamenei to resort to violence against peaceful demonstrators and crack down on journalists and civil activists. The government's use of violence against the people had greatly damaged Iran in the eyes of its fellow Muslims, especially the killing of peaceful demonstrators on the Shiite holy day of Ashura, which has forced many to question the religious legitimacy of the Islamic Republic's actions. Now, Khamenei has to discredit the same person who he had supported and even killed to maintain in power.

It is widely believed that the Islamic Republic is helping Syria to crack down on demonstrators and critics of the regime because of its successes two years ago in doing the same to its own people. Iranian and Syrian political activists both accuse Iran of sending Basij militia to Syria. The United States Treasury Department placed the names of two Iranian Revolution Guards Corps officials on their sanction lists, senior commanders of the Quds Force Qassem Solaimani and Mohsen Chizari, both of whom have been involved in the Syrian government's suppression of popular protests. The Islamic Republic is also accused of helping Bashar al-Asad's regime in tracking opposition activists through social media network sites such as Facebook and Twitter. This is exactly what the Iranian regime did -- and still does -- to its own people. While Iran applies a very severe censorship on internet and blocks political and news websites, websites like Facebook and Twitter are not blocked. Protesters in Syria have burned the Islamic Republic's flag while shouting anti-Iranian slogans. Some have even chanted the Persian word for freedom, "Azadi," in order to make their message to the Iranians loud and clear.

Iranian democrats and critics of the regime are unhappy with Iran's political and financial help to Hezbollah and Hamas and its political and security cooperation with the Syrian regime. After millions of dollars of Iran's aid to Hezbollah after 33 days war, many Iranians have publically criticized the government for its generous help to Hezbollah while many Iranians starve for a descent life. In general, most Iranians want their government to confine its foreign policy within the framework of Iran's national interests and not a pan-Islamic agenda. But resentment toward the Iranian regime has grown since the 2009 election crisis and now Iranian democrats, political activists, and journalists sympathize with the Syrian opposition who are similarly victims of the state's oppression.

What is most pertinent for Iran is to convince Muslims, especially Shiites, to believe that the Islamic Republic would stand up for them against pro-Western forces and its allies. But, Iran's inability to influence events in Bahrain was a great embarrassment. Opposition to Saudi Arabian and United Arab Emirates troop deployments into Bahrain did not dare go beyond mere rhetoric and propaganda. In practice, Iran failed to offer any help to Bahrain's Shiite population. Shiites in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Lebanon and elsewhere should have realized by now that Iran is not as passionate in its support to the Shiite community as it claims. Iran considers itself the only Shiite government in the world that has the responsibility of protecting Shiites. This does not correspond with Iran's foreign policy record, but it is definitely at the core of its propaganda. In several cases, Iran's strategic interests have trumped its

sectarian policy, like Iran's support to a Christian Armenia against a predominantly Shiite Azerbaijan in the 1990s.

Syria, with an Alawite minority ruling over a Sunni majority, is of great interest to Iran, and was the first Arab government that the Islamic republic could establish a close relationship with on a sectarian basis before the Iraq war and Hezbollah's consolidation of political power in the Lebanese government. Even before the revolution in 1979, the Syrian regime tried to approach Shiite clerics like Musa al-Sadr to acquire legitimacy, because for a long time the Alawis were considered heretic by Shiites. Iran projects its regional power by portraying Shiites as a rising power over all Arab countries. As such, it is extremely important not to lose the minority-led Syria to a Sunni majority. Success of the Sunni opposition would change not only Iran's relationship with Syria, but also its relationship to the Shiite community in other Arab countries, especially in Lebanon.

Iran's military doctrine is based on asymmetric warfare. Tehran does its best to prevent any military confrontation with either the west or Israel on its own territory. In fact, in 2003 after the United States invaded Iraq, Iran realized that it might be the next target. Therefore, Iran sent a letter to U.S. state department and offered unconditional negotiations on all issues "including Hezbollah and Hamas." Only after the difficulties the United States faced in Iraq was the offer rescinded and Iran took a more hostile stance towards the United States. Iran and Syria both coordinated on helping insurgencies in Iraq to weaken American influence and shape Iraq's politics.

Iran would like to turn the entire Middle East into a battleground to fight the West and Israel. That is, the entire the Middle East except for Iran. In such a framework, Syria plays an important role for Iran as the main venue through which financial and military help could be sent to Hezbollah and Palestinian groups. Iran and Syria cooperate with each other in supplying Hezbollah with long-range missiles. Iran uses the office of the supreme leader in Zaynabiya, a holy town close to Damascus and also the location of Iran's cultural attache, as a base for training Shiite clerics to promote the concept of the Marjaiya (being a source of emulation) of Ayatollah Khamenei. They are sent by those offices throughout Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf countries to encourage Shiites to follow Khamenei in their religious rituals and to pay him religious taxes. Syria became a significant place for the Islamic Republic in that Iran has total freedom to use it for its own regional agenda. By threatening Israel, Iran gains enough leverage in any negotiation with the West, whether it be over its nuclear program or over its broader policy in the Middle East. Losing Syria would jeopardize this leverage and would change the power equation in the region against Iran.

Syria played an important role in balancing Iran's relationship with other Arab countries. During the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, all Arab countries stood with Saddam Hussein except for Syria. Syria has used the opportunity to mediate between Iran and the Arab world. Every time Iran's relationship with an Arab regime faltered, Syria stepped in to reconcile between the two parties or to cool down the tension. Except for Iraq, especially after what happened in Bahrain, Iran's relationship with its Arab neighbors is not great. Saudi Arabia and other Arab powers are concerned about Iran's ambitious agenda to disseminate Shiism throughout Arab countries in order to project more power for itself. Also, Arab governments have serious concerns about Iran's intention behind its nuclear weapons program. Amidst an ongoing cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, losing Syria to a Sunni majority would mean losing an important bridge to the Arab world and the ability to strengthen local Arab Shiite populations.

Whether Bashar al-Asad survives the current popular uprising, or a Sunni majority takes over power, Iran's relationship with Arab governments in the region will deteriorate in the near future. If Asad falls, Iran would lose an irreplaceable Arab ally. In an unlikely event that Iran and Egypt succeed in their efforts at rapprochement, Egypt would not be in a position to mediate between Iran and its Arab neighbors. Neither would Iraq, where Shiites hold a great share of power in the government, would be able to replace Syria in this capacity. As long as Iran fails to establish a strategic relation with a Sunni Arab government, its reliance on Shiite groups or in case of Syria an Alawi-ruled government would just generate more mistrust towards it in the Arab world.

If Bashar remains in power, democratic forces all over the Arab region will put pressure to blame Iran for the failure

of democratic government. This also would increase sectarian tension between Shiite and Sunni communities throughout Muslim countries. Part of Iran's intension in intervention in Syria is to retaliate against Saudi Arabian and Sunni powers in Syria for what happened in Bahrain. This will jeopardize the democratic movements in both Bahrain and Syria because it turns a movement for democracy into one of sectarian strife.

The Syrian-Iranian nexus seemed set to endure for a long time until the Arab Spring took root in Syria. Even if Bashar al-Asad survives, the Syrian-Iranian alliance will be placed in jeopardy. He would either continue his strategic relationship with Iran, which fuels the wrath of Syria's Sunni majority, or have to tone down Syria's special ties to Iran in order to work through the current domestic strife. Either way, Iran's interests in the region will not be served.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the politics of Iran and Shiite groups in the Middle East. ❖

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