

Influence Curtailed: Democracy in the Arab World Stands to Strip Iran of Its Power

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Articles & Testimony

If the recent political movements in the Arab world lead to more free and liberal societies, this will promise the decline of Iranian influence in the region. For the current Iranian regime, democracy is no longer threatening only at home, but also abroad.

Iranian leaders have tried to portray the Arab uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt within their revolutionary 1979 framework, casting them as successes of their revolution export policy. However, Islamists like Rachid Al-Ghannouchi in Tunisia have claimed the opposite; Al-Ghannouchi does not want to be Tunisia's Khomeini, nor his model of government. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt also made clear that the revolution in Egypt was not an Islamic event and that all of Egypt's citizens have participated. This was made abundantly clear by the slogans and signs heard and seen throughout Tahrir Square. What is clear from this is that the Islamic Republic fears the failure of Islamist ideology over true democratic discourse.

The Arab uprisings have forced Iran to take awkward and contradictory positions, belying their purported underdog, anti-status quo messaging. While some Saudi muftis argue that the demonstrations are religiously illegal, Iranian pro-government ayatollahs, such as Hossein Noori Hamadani, argue that Sunni muftis have misinterpreted Islamic text, which does not forbid demonstrations against unjust rulers. Yet, merely 20 months prior, the same ayatollahs justified the Islamic Republic's crackdown on peaceful demonstrators protesting against the rigged presidential election.

This time around, however, demonstrators are not predominantly Shi'ite Iranian citizens protesting against the Islamic Republic's tyranny, but rather Shi'ites in other Arab states.

Throughout the course of the current Arab uprisings, Iran has sought to portray itself as the voice of oppressed Muslims and a loyal patron of Shi'ites in the Arab world. Bahrain's uprising has provided Iran with ample

opportunity to do so, and Iranian propaganda has accordingly waged a vicious campaign against Bahrain's brutal crackdown on protesters. Ironically, however, similar scenes were seen in Tehran in 2009 and 2010, when the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Basij militia attacked peaceful protesters, killing young men and women who had been demonstrating with shouts of "Where is my vote?" The majority of these victims were Shi'ites, as were the Bahraini victims.

Yet, in his recent speech in March, leader of the Islamic Republic, Aytollah Ali Khamenei, stated that "on regional issues, our position is clear: We defend peoples and their rights, and we oppose bullying powers, dictators, malevolent dominance-seekers and plunderers all over the world." But although he condemns the Libyan government's brutality against its people, he opposes "US and western intervention." Addressing the western power, Khamenei said, "You are not there to defend people; you want Libya's oil; you want to use Libya as a place to monitor the activities of the future revolutionary governments in Egypt and Tunisia." His accusations were echoed by several state-owned news agencies, such as Fars News (belonging to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Council, or IRGC), which asserted that western forces are targeting revolutionaries, rather than Qadhafi's forces.

Returning to the subject of recent demonstrations in Bahrain, Khamenei likened the nature of the protests to those of other regional countries embroiled in turmoil, such as Egypt, Tunisia or Libya. "The [Bahraini] government ignores people's rights," Khamenei remarked. "The main demands of the people were for elections and for one vote for every person. Is this too much?" he asked.

As a leader who only recently manipulated an election in his own country, suppressed those who protested his actions and placed the opposition leader under house arrest, such a statement serves merely to cast him as a hypocrite in the eyes of his people. On Facebook and in other social media, Iranians now ask each other, "Why is a free and fair election good for Bahrain, but not for us?" Their perplexity only increased when Ayatollah Ali Sistani in Najaf added his voice to that of Khamenei in a public condemnation of the Bahraini government for its role in the death of Shi'ites. "Why do the Shi'ites of Bahrain deserve the attention of the ayatollah," they asked, "when Iranian Shi'ites, who were similarly persecuted for political reasons by the Islamic Republic, don't?"

Unsurprisingly, Khamenei denied that his defense of the Bahraini people stems from the fact that most of the opposition is Shi'ite. He claimed that Iran defends all Shi'ites everywhere and labeled any attempts to ignite enmity between Shi'ites and Sunnis a "colonial powers' conspiracy." But history continues to unveil new ironies: Syrians are now demonstrating in the streets, yet on this topic, Iran has not uttered a word. Both Iranian and Syrian opposition sources are accusing the Syrian government of using Iranian IRGC, Basij and Lebanese Hezbollah forces to crack down on people. Shouts of "No Iran, No Hezbollah, but Syria!" ring through the streets. Meanwhile, Fars News reports that Israel is behind the text messages that have appeared on more than a million Syrians' mobile phones in a call for revolution against Assad. Iran condemns western intervention in Libya and Saudi's decision to deploy soldiers to Bahrain, but Iranian pro-government news sources like Raja News reported that Iranian Istishhadions are ready to go to Bahrain, fight with the Bahraini government and Saudi soldiers along with their "Shi'ite brothers."

As for Libya, a picture of Khamenei and Qaddafi smiling happily is now being widely circulated on the Persian Facebook network and other political website. The picture dates from Khamenei's trip to Libya in the 1980s as the then Islamic Republic's president.

Iran and Libya have enjoyed a close relationship since the new regime came to power in Iran 1979. Many Islamist revolutionaries trained in Libya prior to the 1979 revolution. Iran began purchasing chemical weaponry from Libya during the Iran-Iraq war several years later, followed by nuclear technology after the war's end. Given Iran's severed diplomatic ties to Egypt and its poor relations with Tunisia and Morocco, Libya, along with Sudan, served as Iran's main gate of access to North Africa. As a result, Iran has long touted Libya and Sudan as its African allies.

In July of 2008, Luis Moreno Ocampo, chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), alleged that Al-Bashir bore individual criminal responsibility for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in Darfur since 2003. Ali Larijani, speaker of the Majlis, traveled to Sudan in a show of Iranian support for Al-Bashir.

Iran also refrained from pressing Qadhafi's government on the disappearance of Musa Al-Sadr. Al-Sadr was an Iranian cleric and Lebanese Shi'ite community leader who disappeared during his 1978 trip to Libya to meet with a Libyan official. Most reports claim that he was immediately killed by Qadhafi's forces after a bitter dispute with Qadhafi. Al-Sadr had been a close member of Khomeini's family and Khomeini himself was under great emotional pressure to investigate his disappearance. For fear of risking the political benefits of their relations with Qadhafi however, neither Khomeini nor Khamanei pursued Al-Sadr's case.

Like all populist autocratic regimes, Iranian leaders seek to portray themselves as the advocates of the downtrodden everywhere. However, the recent Arab uprisings highlight Iran's hypocrisy and inconsistency more than ever before. It seems that in the Islamic Republic only the authority of the ruling jurist is absolute; everything else is relative. For Iran, not only Islam but also Shi'ism is used as a tool to advance its ambitious agenda in the region, not more.

Because Iran's influence in the region stems mainly from its soft power and propaganda, the possibility that its propaganda might be weakened by the emergence of new democratic regimes in the Middle East has placed it in a very difficult situation. If democratic forces prevail in Arab nations, Islamism will lose its main forum for advocating state rule by Islamic ideology. Anti-American and anti-Israel discourse would be replaced by more practical demands and expectations, as we have already witnessed in the course of demonstrations in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere. Iran would find little fertile ground for its old-fashioned propaganda that portrays itself as the leader of the anti-American world and the main patron of anti-Israel forces. Democratic systems would allow people to focus more on their personal lives, participate more fully in the shaping of their political future, and hold their ruling class more accountable for its actions, meaning that Iranian propaganda would no longer be needed in the struggle against rulers or their western allies.

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