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Saudi Media Take the Lead Against Iran's Regime

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Brief Analysis

Most commentary on the regional reaction to Iran's postelection strife divides Arabs into pro-Iranian and pro-American camps, a simplistic division that misses a key distinction. At the official or semiofficial level, Arab reaction to Iran's current travail is divided into three, not two, main parts: the usual handful of pro-Iranian-government actors (Syria, Hizballah, and Qatar); the surprisingly strident anti-Iranian-government stance from Saudi Arabia; and the large camp of cautious bystanders, including major actors like Egypt, which harbors a serious grudge against Tehran.

Equally noteworthy is that caution, rather than reflexive support for either Iran or the street demonstrators, is also the watchword among major Arab opposition movements, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood and its Hamas offshoot. So far, at the popular level, the dominant feature appears to be -- at least from the outside -- a lack of great activity or even interest, rather than the gathering storm of popular mobilization that some commentators expected.

Saudi-Led Media Charge against Tehran

Apart from Iran's friends in Damascus and Doha, Arab governments have generally avoided direct comment on Iran's internal affairs. Kings, emirs, presidents, and their official representatives have mostly kept silent, endorsing neither Iran's official version of the election nor the popular protests against it. But an analysis of the state-controlled or state-influenced media in these countries, which are much more vocal, is revealing.

The media outlets of Arab actors with axes to grind against Tehran -- such as the Palestinian Authority, Lebanon's March 14 coalition, and most significantly Saudi Arabia -- have replaced the usual taciturn official response with overt schadenfreude and an anti-Iranian-government slant. Newspaper and television coverage from these sources

highlight Iranian demonstrations, Basij militia violence, challenges to the authority of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and rifts among Iranian clerics. These topics remain front-page headlines in all three widely followed, Saudi-sponsored, pan-Arab media outlets: al-Arabiya satellite television and the al-Hayat and al-Sharq al-Awsat daily newspapers. On al-Arabiya, reportage and commentary on Iranian demonstrators and victims of regime violence, such as Neda Agha-Soltan, is both considerable and sympathetic. In its first move against the mainstream foreign media, the Iranian regime accused al-Arabiya of bias, summarily closed its Tehran bureau, and later expelled its reporters from Iran.

In al-Hayat, columnist Ali al-Jahni opined that Iran is "a fake democracy that leads only to bloodshed." Anticipating the obvious riposte, al-Jihani added this intriguing postscript: "The rulers of the Gulf States have never claimed they have come to power through elections, but any expert in Gulf affairs knows that the majority of their citizens don't want to change those rulers . . . the symbols of national unity, stability, and economic development." The antagonistic Saudi media stance is even clearer in its domestic newspapers, especially among local columnists. Adel Tarifi and Abdullah Bakhiet recently published columns in al-Riyadh headlined "The End of the Supreme Leader . . . Not Yet" and "Theology Loses its Supreme Place." Although Saudi Arabia is itself a form of theocracy, these writers imply that only in Iran does the leader actually assert divine authority.

Low-Key Reactions

The glee of Saudi media sources is conspicuously absent from most newspapers in Egypt, Morocco, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), despite their particular national grievances against Tehran. In part, this reflects sensitivity to any examples of popular opposition. In Iraq -- a country that is more democratic but also more politically precarious and entwined with Iran than other Arab states -- the media have special, security-related reasons for their relative reticence on Iran. On June 26, for example, Baghdad's leading al-Zaman newspaper did not have a single front-page story on the subject.

In Egypt, despite a war of words with Iran in April over a Hizballah terrorist plot on Egyptian soil, the media have mostly reported factually about the events in Iran. Al-Ahram, the leading daily, has carried a front-page story about postelection issues nearly every day for the past two weeks, many with photos of pro-Mousavi demonstrations. But columnists have generally refrained from partisan commentary on these events (with a few notable exceptions, such as a lead al-Ahram op-ed on June 18 pleading for more Western support for the demonstrators in Tehran). Egypt's comparatively neutral media position seems to contradict its opposition to the Iranian regime. One al-Arabiya journalist, Ali Brisheh, suggested a reason: focus on Iran's demonstrations might contaminate the Egyptians with "Iranian influenza," inspiring them to protest against their own regime. Egypt's reticence may also be a message to Iran to stop its own anti-Egyptian propaganda -- a message that appears to be having some success, since Iran's official media focus on alleged "Western" or "Zionist," rather than "pro-American Arab regime," meddling in Iran.

Bahrain is a special case, in which the tension between appeasing and opposing Tehran is taking an acute and visible form. Bahrain's government briefly suspended the leading local Akhbar al-Khaleej newspaper on June 23 after it published a column criticizing the Iranian regime and even referencing a rumor about Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad's supposed Jewish ancestry. The next day, this newspaper was back in circulation, but with noticeably lower-profile coverage of and commentary on Iran's difficulties. Similarly, in the UAE, after a handful of commentaries by Abdel Wahhab Badrakhan and others critical of Iran's suppression, the media have reverted to a largely neutral approach.

Islamist Media Tread Carefully

Unexpectedly, the response of the main Islamist opposition movements has been restrained. The popular Arabic website of the Muslim Brotherhood has carried relatively little commentary about the situation: just five pieces over the past ten days, of which three were vehemently pro-Ahmadinezhad but the other two quite neutral. Uncertainty

about the outcome is the most likely explanation for this unaccustomed reticence. Hamas's al-Aqsa television has similarly aired very few items about Iran: nothing until the past few days and without implying any position except a rejection of outside interference. Unlike Hizballah, which is ideologically tied to Iran's religious leaders, what matters for Hamas is Iran's position on Israel. Hamas most likely believes that no matter who is in power, Iran's support for Hamas will continue.

Iran's Allies Stay the Course

The media of Syria, Qatar, and Hizballah have openly aligned themselves with Ahmadinezhad and the Iranian leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, even as some in Washington look for signs of divergence. Although some uneasiness or hedging of bets may happen behind the scenes, the outward posture remains as solidly aligned with Tehran as ever.

Syrian dailies, all strictly government controlled, continue to trumpet charges of U.S. interference in Iran, despite recent overtures from the Obama administration. Hizballah's al-Manar television and other media positioned themselves with Ahmadinezhad from day one, presenting Iranian allegations of Western interference as fact and avoiding coverage of Iranian demonstrators.

Al-Jazeera, the still-popular Qatari pan-Arab satellite television channel, is concentrating mostly on the official Iranian version of events, while trying to have it both ways. Its English-language edition includes occasional close-ups of Iranian demonstrators and victims of the regime, along with some reprinted columns critical of Tehran. But the Arabic programs and website -- the ones that matter in the region -- almost never contain such material, instead giving pride of place to Iranian government allegations of foreign-media or other nefarious interference in Iran's internal affairs.

Of passing interest is the controversy sparked by the emir of Qatar, Shaikh Hamad bin Khalifah, who defended Iran during a visit to France this week, saying "Iran has changed four presidents in the past thirty years, while the Arab countries changed none; Iran is a democratic country." The comment got top billing in al-Sharq al-Awsat on June 24, although the next day's lead commentary pointed out that the emir's assertion is not literally correct, even if the Arabs (Qatar included) do have "a problem" with democracy. Other Arab media have largely maintained a low profile on this incident.

Arab Street Stays Silent

Fragmentary reports about the reactions of "ordinary" Arabs (as distinct from democracy or other activists) to the violence in Iran indicate relatively little sense of involvement or connection. In Kuwait, according to one diplomat, nearly every day there are unreported pro-Mousavi demonstrations of seventy to eighty people outside the Iranian embassy -- but these are all expatriate Iranians, not Kuwaitis. In Jordan, according to one credible account, "The only issues right now are food, tea, and coffee. My relatives have not said one word about Iran." Another Arab reports that the fabled and once-feared "Arab street" has been replaced by the cushy "Arab sofa" -- most folks watch other peoples' troubles on television, but do nothing about them. A contact in Jeddah, asked by phone about local reactions to the Iranian election, replied "What Iranian election?"

Some foreign journalists assert that the repression in Iran punctures its popular regional image as a champion of the oppressed. This is plausible but also overblown, primarily because there is little evidence that Iran ever enjoyed such an image in the first place. In fact, the best (but still not very good) polling data from the region indicates that Ahmadinezhad, for all his antics, never attracted a large Arab following and that his popularity and Iran's overall image were already clearly in decline even before the current electoral trauma.

U.S. Policy Implications

Overall, the divided Arab reaction to Iran should be at most a secondary factor in current U.S. policy calculations. In

the future, if Washington seeks public Arab support against Tehran, Riyadh rather than Cairo appears to be the most receptive address. Damascus, for its part, offers no visible sign of reciprocating recent U.S. overtures by distancing itself from Iran, suggesting that skepticism about this aspect of a possible U.S.-Syrian detente is justified. Moreover, the prospect for popular Arab uprisings against autocratic governments -- modeled on the recent developments in Tehran -- is doubtful.

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