

## **Iran and the Arab Awakening**

### ***Introduction***

The revolutionary wave of uprisings that has erupted in the Middle East since 17 December 2010, otherwise known as the “Arab Awakening”, has radically altered the geopolitical makeup of the region. Political systems, national interests, alliances and rivalries have been reassessed. In this new political landscape, Iran, much like Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel, seeks to fill the vast power vacuum created and advance its regional influence.

Initially, the Iranian regime viewed the Arab Awakening with enthusiasm. Finally pro-Western dictatorships the Islamic Republic had denounced since its creation were overthrown. The 1979 revolution appeared to have been successfully exported. The rise of the Islamist parties could provide Iran’s theocracy a unique opportunity to exert regional hegemony (a long-standing strategic objective).

A year later, Iran’s enthusiasm has withered into concern and uncertainty. This paper will argue that far from advancing its regional influence, Iran is losing out from the Arab Awakening. Specifically, Iran is losing its ability to exert soft power in the region and stands to lose a key regional ally if the Syrian regime is overthrown. Crucially, I will argue that this decline was not inevitable; Iran has made a series of mistakes both in its exercise of soft power and its policy towards Syria that have weakened its regional influence considerably.

First, I will examine how Iran’s overall response to the uprisings has diminished its soft power. Then I will focus on the Iranian-Syrian alliance – why it is so vital to Iran’s geopolitical strategy and how Iran’s response to the Syrian uprising has weakened its regional influence.

## **SOFT POWER – “Irrelevant Iran”**

The battle for hearts and minds has become instrumental in the Islamic Republic’s quest for regional hegemony. With its anti-Israeli and anti-Western rhetoric, the regime has appealed to the ‘Arab street’ to garner support, exploiting popular grievances their authoritarian, pro-Western governments failed to address.

### ***Iran’s Soft Power in the Arab Awakening***

As protests have spread across the Middle East and North Africa, Iran has tried to exercise its soft power to attract newly-emerging regimes to the Iranian model of governance. However, Iran has taken a series of steps that have considerably diminished its popularity among both the Arab people and their new governments, weakening its position as a result.

Firstly, in an effort to render itself relevant to regional developments, Iran has wrongly depicted the Arab Awakening as an Islamic one. According to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, “Islam has become the guiding principle of [the] popular movements.”<sup>i</sup> Worse, Iran claims the protests are rooted in the 1979 revolution as if to assume responsibility for their rise and development; “this Islamic awakening...was created by the victory of the great Revolution of the Iranian nation.”<sup>ii</sup> Not only are these depictions false but they are insulting to the Arab masses - of all religions - protesting socioeconomic and political hardships unrelated to Iran. Such pronouncements do nothing for Iran’s popularity on the Arab street.

In his recent message to Hajj Pilgrims, Ayatollah Khamenei went one step further, urging the “formation of an international Islamic power-bloc.”<sup>iii</sup> This underlines Iran’s hegemonic ambitions – not only to be relevant but to play a decisive role in the new Middle East. While this goal is not new or surprising, the Iranian regime’s inaccurate depiction of the Arab Awakening as a result is harming its soft power status.

Arab public opinion of Iran matters not only because of the centrality of soft power in Iran’s geopolitical strategy but because if real democracies are established in the aftermath of the Arab Awakening, public opinion will play a greater role in the region than ever before.

This is bad news for Tehran. Opposition groups in the Arab world are already distancing themselves from Iran as a result. Immediately after Ayatollah Khamenei's first speech on the uprisings, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood dismissed his characterization of the protests; "the Muslim Brotherhood regards the revolution as the Egyptian people's revolution, not an Islamic revolution...[it] includes Muslims, Christians and [is] from all sects and political tendencies."<sup>iv</sup> Mohammad Shaqfah, the exiled leader of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood commented on November 28, "we are impressed with the Turkish governance system and we are not keen on the Iranian model. We don't want to impose anything on the people."<sup>v</sup> Regardless of the verity of these statements, the fact that these groups are ardently disassociating themselves from the Islamic Republic reflects how weak Iran's soft power has become in the region.

Aside from framing the Arab Awakening in Islamic terms, Iran has made other false statements. In July for example, the Supreme Leader insisted that "the core of the uprisings...has been anti-US and anti-Israel".<sup>vi</sup> Ali Akbar Velayati, Ayatollah Khamenei's foreign affairs top advisor, claimed that "the issue of Palestine has become a fundamental aspect of the recent wave of popular uprisings."<sup>vii</sup> While the motivation behind such statements is clear – (as Martin Indyk points out, "the best way for Iran to spread its influence into the Arab heartland is to stoke the flames of conflict with Israel"<sup>viii</sup>) – they are irrelevant. It conveys ignorance on Iran's part that it does not publicly acknowledge the real roots of the Arab Awakening even if privately it is fully aware of its nature and implications. Again, Iran, in an attempt to increase its regional role, is actually diminishing its soft power among the Arab street.

The double standard Iran has exercised in its response to the Arab Awakening further discredits the regime. As the US has repeatedly underlined, Iran "says it stands for the rights of protesters abroad, yet represses its own people at home."<sup>ix</sup> While Iran criticizes the "inaction of the international community and the Arab League towards brutalities of the Manama regime"<sup>x</sup> and expresses concern over human rights in Bahrain<sup>xi</sup>, it continues to support repression not only at home but in neighboring Syria. This does not go unseen. In a recent poll on Arab public opinion, 86% of Arabs supported Syrian rebels who seek regime change<sup>xii</sup>.

Finally, the Arab Awakening has provided the Arab masses a chance to establish genuine democracies – an option that renders the Iranian model of continued repression and socioeconomic hardships not only irrelevant but undesirable. It is no wonder that Turkey, which appears to have achieved a balance between Islam and democracy while sustaining economic growth<sup>xiii</sup>, has by the far the most favored political system according to Egyptians<sup>xiv</sup>.

To conclude, Iran's response to the Arab Awakening has diminished its soft power in four ways; by framing the uprisings in Islamic terms, by inaccurately suggesting they are essentially anti-Israeli and anti-Western, by exercising double standards and by failing to provide a viable model for newly-emerging regimes in the Arab world.

## **IRANIAN-SYRIAN RELATIONS**

### ***Why Syria Matters: Historical Background***

Only by examining its historical context can we understand the importance of the Syrian-Iranian alliance in the region and consequently Iran's response to Syrian protests.

Emerging in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution, the alliance was consolidated when Hafez al-Assad's regime unexpectedly sided with non-Arab Iran in the Iran-Iraq War. This decision was based on much more than common hostility towards Iraq. Several regional events had rendered Damascus isolated and vulnerable; Egypt's betrayal in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, its consequent efforts to conclude a separate peace agreement with Israel (followed by Jordan), Iraq's decision to cease use of the trans-Syrian oil pipeline and the formation of a Saudi-Iraqi-Jordanian entente following the November 1978 Arab Summit. As Jubin Goodarzi notes, "it was thus no surprise that by 1979/80, the betrayals and disappointments of the past had killed any lingering Syrian hope of relying on fellow Arabs."<sup>xv</sup>

With the Pahlavi regime overthrown, Assad looked to Iran as a solution; to outflank Iraq, to bolster his position vis-à-vis the Gulf Arab sheikdoms and to increase his influence over Lebanese Shiites<sup>xvi</sup>. On Iran's part, Syrian rapprochement was a welcome development as relations with Saudi Arabia and Iraq eroded. Iran, like Syria, was dangerously isolated.

Not only did Syria provide Soviet-made arms and military assistance throughout the war, providing access to Syrian airfields and holding manoeuvres on the Iraqi border to divert Iraqi forces from the eastern front<sup>xvii</sup>, but crucially, Syria's presence as an Iranian ally prevented the formation of a hostile Arab union in a "clash of civilizations"<sup>xviii</sup> and eventually provided a link for Iran to influence inter-Arab affairs. This was (and continues to be) vital for Iran's regional security.

The alliance has been tested throughout its history, particularly in Lebanon. While Syria backed the AMAL Party in the 1980s, Iran chose to arm the religious and extremist Hezbollah. Syrian relations with the group were far from friendly, leading to violent clashes between the two proxies<sup>xix</sup>. Despite a period of tension, prolonged by Syria's decision to participate in the Middle East peace process after the Gulf War, the alliance has endured.

What characterized this 'low point' was conflicting agendas. Assad viewed Lebanon as a vital buffer zone between Syria and Israel, whereas Iran considered Lebanon an "ideal locale to export the Iranian Revolution."<sup>xx</sup> As long as they have had common goals (regardless of differing ideological visions), Syrian-Iranian relations have thrived; be it forcing U.S. peacekeepers out of Lebanon in 1984, containing Saddam Hussein's Iraq or pressuring Israel through Hezbollah and Hamas today.

### ***Syrian-Iranian Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***

Thirty years later, this remains. Syria wants to regain the Golan Heights and keep its influence over Lebanese politics. Iran vies for leadership in the Persian Gulf and wants its allies to rule in Iraq. Accordingly, both regimes want to neutralize Israeli capabilities and prevent American encroachment. As Iranian Defense Minister Mustafa Mohammad Najjar said in 2006, "Iran considers Syria's security its own security, and we consider our defence capabilities to be those of Syria. Our cooperation is based on a strategic pact and unity against common threats."<sup>xxi</sup>

The alliance is based on much more than military cooperation. Iran has implemented numerous industrial projects in Syria, such as power plants and car assembly lines and

established a joint bank last year.<sup>xxii</sup> Iran not only exports arms to Syria but also helps finance Syrian arms purchases from Russia, Belarus and North Korea. In 2007, Syria reported that Iran was their top non-Arab investor.<sup>xxiii</sup>

### *Iran's response to the Syrian Uprising*

It is in this context that Iran's unabashed support for Assad's regime is best understood. Iran is not about to abandon its most important regional ally after thirty years of economic and political cooperation, reaping extensive gains for both sides.

Accordingly, the Syrian uprising has been singled out by Iran as a "mischievous act of Westerners, particularly Americans and Zionists."<sup>xxiv</sup> Unlike events in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, which represent an "Islamic Awakening"<sup>xxv</sup>, the protests in Syria have been described as "artificial... or exaggerate a demand of a small group and present it, instead, as the demand and will of the majority."<sup>xxvi</sup> Such remarks are similar to President Assad's own, condemning the "great conspiracy whose tentacles extend to some nearby countries and far-away countries, with some inside the country."<sup>xxvii</sup>

Not only has Iran gone out of its way to disassociate the Arab Awakening from developments in Syria, it has aided the crackdown on Syrian protestors. Initially US officials claimed Iran was providing "technical and personnel support"<sup>xxviii</sup> with "not only weapons and riot gear but also sophisticated surveillance equipment... [to] track down opponents"<sup>xxix</sup>. Emails recently leaked by Wikileaks suggest Iran's involvement is much greater than previously reported. According to Stratfor, a global intelligence company, "there are in Syria about 3,000 IRGC men...[they] are leading the pro-regime armed gangs. Syrian soldiers who refuse to open fire on protestors are killed by the Iranians..."<sup>xxx</sup> Iran's simultaneous criticism of Saudi Arabia for its "interventionist policies"<sup>xxxi</sup> and "Western meddling in Syrian affairs"<sup>xxxii</sup> illustrates the extent of Iranian double standards.

If Assad's regime collapses, not only does Iran risk losing its key strategic ally Syria but also its ability to counter Israel through Hezbollah and Hamas. The millions of dollars in

economic aid and supplies Iran provides Hezbollah are mostly channelled through Syria. As Howard Berman noted in a congressional hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, “[the Assad] regime’s demise...would deprive Iran of its primary base of operations in the Middle East and mark perhaps its first major strategic setback in the region. It would also mark a setback for Hezbollah. I don’t think it would prevent Iran arming Hezbollah altogether but it would certainly make it more difficult.”<sup>xxxiii</sup>

The Iranian government is clearly alarmed by the possible collapse of the Assad regime and has taken considerable steps to prevent it. However, Iran only stands to lose from this tactic.

While Iran pursues a realpolitik strategy towards Syria, desperate not to lose its key regional ally, it is rapidly losing any appeal it had gained over the past thirty years as an anti-Western, anti-Israeli nation that overthrew the Shah’s autocratic regime. The more Iran supports the brutality of the Syrian government, the more unpopular Iran appears to the Arab street.

Not only is Iran’s blind eye towards Syria hypocritical (while congratulating the other uprisings and revolutions), it serves as a strong reminder of the repression the Islamic Republic has exercised itself, not only after the contested 2009 presidential elections but since its creation. The Islamic Republic shares many characteristics of those authoritarian regimes the Arab masses are protesting against. As the former Iranian deputy Foreign Minister, Mohammad Sadr stated, “if the current Iranian government had a better international status, it could have attracted the Syrian opposition to mediate and control the ongoing crisis in Syria.”<sup>xxxiv</sup>

By associating itself with Syria, whatever the strategic motivations may be, the Iranian regime is losing support from the rest of the Arab world. This will have vast implications of Assad’s regime collapses. Not only will it be much harder for new democracies that acknowledge public opinion to form ties with Iran, a country that aided the crackdown on protestors in Syria, it is unlikely that the new Syrian regime will want to resume friendly relations with Iran, who aided the crackdown on its people. There have already been indications of this. An Iranian MP who had visited Syria last August stated how concerned he was with anti-Iranian and anti-Shiite slogans in certain regions of Syria. He lamented that “in the past one

hundred years there had never been an instance of setting our flag on fire in the region, but this has now happened in Syria."<sup>xxxv</sup>

Even Hamas has distanced itself from the Syrian regime, refusing to hold rallies in Palestinian refugee camps in support of Assad and opting not to sign a statement by nine other Palestinian groups in solidarity with his regime.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Not only does this reflect badly on Iran for its unconditional support for the Syrian government, but Iran has soured its relations with Hamas as a result, having cut funding in August<sup>xxxvii</sup>. If Iran's relations with Hamas don't improve, Iran is not only further isolated but weakened in its ability to counter Israel.

The Iranians did briefly adopt a more balanced public stance towards Syria. In late August, for example, Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi announced the Syrian government was included in the list of states he urged to "answer to the demands of its people."<sup>xxxviii</sup> In his interview with CNN in October, President Ahmadinejad stated that Iran would "encourage both the government of Syria and the other side, all parties to reach an understanding."<sup>xxxix</sup>

Nevertheless, such statements may have more to do with domestic political rivalries; Iranian policy towards Syria has remained essentially the same. Iran continues to praise Assad's decision to "undertake [political] reforms" as the "only solution to the...crisis."<sup>xl</sup> Aside from talks on greater economic cooperation in the housing, transport and tourism sectors<sup>xli</sup>, crucially, Iran is now aiding Assad to defy Western sanctions. The Iranians have provided a vessel so that Syrian oil can be shipped to China – a huge asset for an increasingly isolated country and potentially worth \$80 billion to Assad's regime<sup>xlii</sup>.

When the Syrian opposition and protestors witness this unwavering support for the regime vis-à-vis Turkey's response – hosting the offices of the Syrian National Council and more recently the second 'Friends of the Syrian People' conference - it is no wonder that Erdogan's Turkey is more popular than Ahmadinejad's Iran among the Arab people<sup>xliii</sup>.

Finally, Iran, by supporting Assad, whose family is Alawite (a Shiite sect), exposes sectarian differences it has consistently tried to shed in its quest for regional hegemony. Since



1979, Iran has been fiercely competing with Saudi Arabia for Islamic universalisms. Iranian support for Assad's Syria plays directly into the hands of Saudi propaganda, that Iran only champions Shiite causes and that its regional ambitions are anti-Sunni<sup>xliv</sup>. To make matters worse, while Iran is aiding pro-regime forces, Saudi Arabia has called on the opposition to "confront Bashar Assad's crimes against humanity"<sup>xlv</sup> and is creating a multi-million dollar fund to pay members of the rebel Free Syrian Army<sup>xlvi</sup>. Thus, Iran's unconditional support for Syria stands to favor a key regional rival vying for influence.

### **LOOKING FORWARD**

At some point Iran will have to reassess its support for Assad. If and when Tehran feels his regime is doomed, Iran will change its stance to influence post-Assad Syria from the best position possible. Given the extent of support it has provided Assad so far, such a shift will most likely prove ineffective; it will be too little too late. If Iran goes on to lose its strongest Arab ally, it will mark a substantial loss in the regional influence and security Iran had enjoyed over the past 30 years.

As for Iran's soft power status, it is unlikely that this will be regained any time soon. Undoubtedly, Arab public opinion may not play as big a role as some envision following the Arab Awakening (the futures of new regimes in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya remain unclear). Nevertheless, given the centrality of soft power in Iran's perpetual bid for regional hegemony, the Iranian regime should be concerned that the speeches, statements and responses it makes throughout the Arab Awakening are having a negative impact on its image in the region and beyond.

## Notes

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