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Iran and the Arab Springs

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Three main factors seem to affect the stance of Iran towards the wave of uprisings that have shaken the Arab world since January. The first is the ideological paradigm of the Islamic revolution while the second comprises the real strategic possibilities for Iran to exploit the situation and gain pre-eminence in the region. The last factor is the internal political situation, which has demonstrated that the regime is not immune to similar popular upheavals.

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The popular nature of the uprisings and their sudden eruption have not only rendered the West and the regimes shaken by the riots unprepared, but also those players who could have taken advantage of the Arab Spring. The Islamic Republic of Iran is one of them. The Iranian revolution has often been quoted as a historical paradigm and a crucial event propelling the Islamist political revival in the last decades. A common Islamic front and the resistance against Western imperialism and foreign secular doctrines are key themes of the Iranian quest for leadership in the Middle East. Thus, since the outbreak of the uprisings, the Iranian authorities and media have emphasized instead on the Islamic nature of the popular protests. Tehran has hailed the Tunisian and Egyptian upheavals against the secular tyrants serving the Western interests as a prosecution of the Iranian revolution.¹

But more than thirty years have passed since 1979, and the prospect of state Islamization does not seem to have a great appeal to the present day protesters. The riots are mainly comprised of young people, influenced by different social models and types of mass media and region-wide human networks. Islamists like Al-Ghannoushi in Tunisia or the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt have reassured the public opinion and the international media of their commitment to adhere to a new pluralistic and democratic order.² For years, the Islamic movements have been marginalized or even banned by the previous regimes. Their legitimating is a direct effect of the protesters' demand for pluralistic systems. Moreover, Islamist participation in the new political framework is also allowed by the consent of the military. Under the preceding regimes the national armies have been trained and often employed to face the Islamist threat. The clearance that the military gives to Islamists certainly comes under popular pressure but nonetheless it implies the moderation of the Islamists' discourse and programs.³

The sectarian and ethnic divisions inside the Muslim world are additional elements that contradict the Iranian narrative. The spread of the Persian and Shiite influence in the Middle East is traditionally viewed with distrust, in a region populated chiefly by Arabs and Sunni Muslims. The situation in Bahrain, a Shiite country ruled by a small Sunni elite, seems to provide a major opportunity to Iran. In Manama, as well as in the Saudi Arabia's Eastern province, Iran could profit from the degeneration of socio-economic grievances into a sectarian clash. However, even a sectarian drift of the protest does not necessarily lead to the adoption of the Iranian governance model. Both Bahraini and Saudi Shiites express pride in their Arab identity and historically rely on the Lebanese and Iraqi high clerics for spiritual guidance. The Twelver Shiites lack a common supreme spiritual leader and several high ranked clergymen are competent to interpret the divine law.⁴ Currently, there is no resident marja -or grand Ayatollah- in the Arabian peninsula. Aside from the Iraqi As-Sistani in Najaf and Taqi al-Mudarrasi in Karbala, another most revered Ayatollah in Bahrain is the Iranian Sadeq Shirazi in Qom. Both Sistani and Shirazi are not in accordance with Iran's theocratic ideology and their conception of clerical involvement in politics is more for electoral politics. Finally, the main Shiite opposition parties in Bahrain, Al-Wifaq and the Islamic Action Society, do not represent themselves as transnational movements and they are more concerned with municipal politics than to serve as Iranian proxies.⁵

For these reasons, despite a war of words and the warnings exchanged between Tehran and Riyadh,⁶ the Iranian actual approach in the Gulf has been extremely cautious so far. Moreover, the Ayatollahs' regime is well aware of its structural weaknesses in comparison to other regional competitors like Saudi Arabia or Israel, which are also backed by the US military assets and assistance. An assertive Iranian foreign policy aimed at openly exploit its neighbours' instability can provide the justification for a military retaliation against Tehran. But even a limited armed intervention can be disastrous for the Iran's rising regional power. Provided that such an action would be supported by the US, Tehran's weakness

in air-power leaves its military facilities and economic infrastructures extremely vulnerable to targeted air strikes.⁷

As of now, there is no clear evidence of any Iranian material support or infiltration in the uprisings. This fact does not imply that it will be so in the future, but Iran's leeway is more limited than it may appear. The intervention of the Peninsula Shield Force, the military wing of the Gulf Cooperation Council for the Arab States (GCC), called to tame the unrest in Manama and secure the Al-Khalifa regime, can be seen also as a clear message sent by the Gulf's countries to Iran: any foreign intrusion in the internal affairs of the Arabic peninsula will provoke a tough response. However, this affirmative Saudi move could be risky because it may lead to the internationalization of the Bahraini question. Though the Bahraini government called for support from the GCC, the Peninsula Shield intervention has been denounced by the opposition in Manama as an external aggression. Finally, Tehran could denounce the Saudi intervention as an act of aggression which would legitimise its proactive involvement in Bahrain.⁸

If the opportunities in the Gulf are not so easily exploitable, the situation in the other Arab countries can further challenge Iran's position in the Middle East. The ousting of Mubarak has resulted in the re-establishment of the official diplomatic ties between Egypt and Iran, which have been non-existent since the Camp David accords of 1978. On the other hand, the Gaddafi regime has been one of the few Arab allies of Iran in the last decades.⁹ However, it is the Syrian uprising that mainly worries Tehran. The regime of Bashar Al-Assad is Iran's principal ally and it represents an important channel of transit and support for the Levant's Islamist militias backed by Tehran. The Syrian uprising has stressed the contradictions of the Iranian revolutionary discourse as, in this case, Tehran is a strong supporter of a secular autocrat. But, importantly, the Syrian internal crisis deprives Tehran of an effective ally. The Al-Assad family and most of the member of the political elites that have ruled the country for the last fifty years belong to the Alawi Muslim community,¹⁰ a small minority in a predominantly Sunni country. The possibility that a Sunni-led regime, Islamists-backed or not, will take over Al-Assad, represents a great concern to Tehran, particularly if the new regime turns towards its Arab neighbours. But the current ties between Damascus and Tehran could also be tested, for Assad could make some concessions to the other regional players in order to weather the present increasing isolation faced by his regime.¹¹

The structural weaknesses of the Iranian power and its difficulties to gain the hearts and minds of protesters through the soft power of the Islamist discourse are not the only causes impeding Iran's ability to take profit from the Arab spring. On the internal front plan, Tehran's regime must cope with the risk of becoming the next authoritarian regime to fall under the popular pressure. Indeed, Iran is not immune from the material quandaries that have triggered the riots in Cairo as well as in Manama. The international isolation of the country is loosely affecting the national economy, contributing to high unemployment as the discontent proliferates throughout the population. Yet in June 2010, months before the Arab uprisings, hundreds of thousands of Iranians, the so called Green movement, overflowed into the streets contesting the disguised re-election of Ahmadinejad as President. However, since then, the Principlist faction, representing the pasdarans' interests and supported by the traditional conservatives, has consolidated its grip on power reinforcing the authoritarian features of the regime. The Iranian security apparatus is far more effective and brutal in comparison with those of Ben Ali and Mubarak. Moreover, unlikely the other Arab countries' armies, the ideological commitment of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards leaves little chance that they would step aside in the case of a massive uprising. After the 2009 protests, the IRG has also established a cyber defence command, augmenting its control

over the communication and media networks of the country. Besides, the Iranian opposition is divided concerning its ultimate goal between the reformists and those who want to put an end to the rule of the clerics,¹² such as young people or the exiled National Council of Resistance.¹³

However, the events in North Africa have revitalized the opposition movement. On February 14th, a manifestation of a thousand of people, displaying solidarity in support of the Egyptian revolt, soon became a protest against the regime, as the participants were charged by the security forces. Slogans supporting the Egyptian revolution turned in chants against Khamenei. A week after the manifestation, the opposition leaders Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karrubi were arrested. But the regime reaction also struck down on Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, an iconic figure of the Iranian revolution and former reformist president, who is regarded as a neutral conciliator between the conservative camp and the opposition. Rafsanjani enjoys broader and deeper support than Khamenei among large sections of the old political and religious elite. Following the February events, he was been stripped of his membership to the Assembly of Experts, a body charged with electing, monitoring, and dismissing the Supreme Leader of Iran.¹⁴

But Khamenei's alienation of the reformist camp, which constitutes half of the Iranian political elite, and his over-reliance on pasdarans' force¹⁵ could lead to the complete loss of popular support, even though it could also reinforce the regime's control over the country in the long period. This would lead to a further exacerbation of the political polarization in the country. Meanwhile, if the Arab Spring leads to real and lasting reforms and to more pluralistic political systems, the Islamic Republic's autocratic regime will find even fewer sympathizers in the Arab world. Hence, though the Ayatollahs' regime will not be flooded by the 2011 wave of uprisings due to its strategic and internal weaknesses and to the low appeal of its ideological discourse, nonetheless it seems unlikely that it will maximize its pay-off from the present situation.

NOTES

1. See for example the Ahmadinejad speech on anniversary of the revolution on February 11, 2011: <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/IranianIs&showFullAbstract=1>, (Accessed on April 18, 2011).
2. See for example the Muslim Brotherhood official website: Ikhwanweb, "MB Welcomes Dialogue with the West without Preconditions", 22/04/2011 (Accessed on April 22, 2010), <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=28442>.
3. See for example: Basly, Rajaa, "The Future of al-Nahda in Tunisia", Arab Reform Bulletin 20/04/2011 (Accessed on April 21, 2011), The Carnegie Endowment for Democracy, <http://carnegieendowment.org/arb/?fa=show&article=43675>.
4. The supreme authority in the Twelver Shi'a Islam is the twelfth and final Imam Muhammad Al-Mahdi, who is believed to be in hiding.
5. Rahimi, Babak, "Special Commentary: Iran and the Bahraini Uprising", The Jamestown Foundation, 08/03/2011 (Accessed on April 12, 2011), [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=37611&cHash=21bcc588e70951dfb44934e2d5027c81](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=37611&cHash=21bcc588e70951dfb44934e2d5027c81).
6. Molavi, Afshin, "War of Words over Bahrain Rattles Region", The Iran Primer, 11/04/2011 (Accessed on April 18, 2011), <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2011/apr/11/war-words-over-bahrain-rattles-region>.
7. The determination of Iran's regional competitors and the possibility of employing this kind of option are well illustrated by Saudi Arabia's granting of clear skies in the case of Israeli attacks against the Iranian nuclear sites. Tomlinson, Hugh, "Saudi Arabia gives Israel clear skies to Attack Iranian Nuclear Sites", The Times, 12/06/2010 (Accessed on April 27, 2011), http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article7148555.ece.
8. Roberts, David B., "The endgame in Bahrain: Saudi and UAE troops enter Manama", Royal United Services Institute, 10/03/2011 (Accessed on April 18, 2011), <http://www.rusi.org/go.php?structureID=commentary&ref=C4D80925B1234B>.
9. Khalaji, Mehdi, "Influence Curtailed: Democracy in the Arab World Stands to Strip Iran of Its Power", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 12/04/2011 (Accessed on April 18, 2011), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC06.php?CID=1609>.
10. The Alawites are known to follow a syncretistic form of Islam often seen as heretic, especially by the Sunnis.
11. Lesser, Ian, O., "How Events in Syria will Change the Strategic Landscape", The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 29/04/2011 (Accessed on May 2, 2011), <http://blog.gmfus.org/2011/04/how-events-in-syria-will-change-the-strategic-landscape/>.
12. Abdo, Geneive, "Green Movement 2.0?", Foreign Affairs, 18/02/2011 (Accessed on April 18, 2011), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67458/geneive-abdo/green-movement-20>.
13. The National Council of Resistance of Iran was founded in 1981 in Paris. For its official stance concerning the Arab Spring and the last developments in Iran see: Senegri, Azzedine, "A Black Tornado. An interview with Maryam Rajavi, the president-elect of the National Council of Resistance of Iran", The Majalla, 18/03/2011 (Accessed on April 18, 2011), <http://www.majalla.com/en/interview/article319408.ece>.
14. Khalaji, Mehdi, "Iran's Political Superbowl: Ahmadinejad vs. Rafsanjani", The Washington Institute

for Near East Policy, 04/03/2011 (Accessed on April 18, 2011),
<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3319>.

15. Afoneh, Ali, "Khamenei's balancing act", *The Middle East Quarterly* 18: 1, 2011 (Accessed on April 18, 2011), <http://www.meforum.org/2847/khamenei-balancing-act>.