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Iran and the Arab Spring: Between Expectations and Disillusion

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Iran and the Arab Spring: Between Expectations and Disillusion

Abstract

The 1979 Iranian Revolution undoubtedly belongs to the “great” revolutions of modern times – all of which were characterized by universalistic efforts and the claim to have set new social, political and cultural norms with global validity. In this sense, the Iranian revolutionaries felt the obligation to actively reintroduce Islam as a revelation for the whole world, not only for Muslims. Yet, they soon became aware that most Muslims viewed their export strategy as either an attempt to enforce Shiism, or – even worse – to conceal mere national megalomania. Therefore, the current leadership argues that the revolution should no longer be exported actively, but that Iran should serve as an example. Consequently, Supreme Leader Khamenei called the events of the Arab Spring a “natural enlargement of Iran’s Islamic revolution of 1979” and credited his country for being the catalyst of this “Islamic awakening.” The present article will analyze selected regional reactions to the Islamic awakening concept, which did not altogether meet Iranian expectations.

Keywords: Arab Spring, Iran, political Islam, Middle East, regional system

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Article Outline

- 1 Introduction
 - 2 Iranian Foreign Policy and the Arab Spring
 - 3 Reactions in the Arab World
 - 4 The Struggle for the Prerogative of Interpretation of the Arab Spring inside Iran
 - 5 Conclusion
- References

1 Introduction

On 11 February 2011, the main celebrations in Tehran to mark the anniversary of the Iranian Revolution were heavily influenced by the recent upheavals that had occurred in the Arab world – its immediate neighborhood. The Tunisian ruler Ben Ali had fled the country at the beginning of the year, and on the day of the celebrations in Iran, public anger forced the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, to step down. The Arab Spring had started, and hardly any state in the Middle East or North Africa was able to avoid the effects of its force. On this very day, the leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran was jubilant. Addressing his “brothers in faith” in Tunisia and Egypt, Supreme Leader Khamenei declared that the events taking

place in their home countries constituted a “natural continuation of the Iranian revolution of 1979” (Alfoneh 2011: 36) and had “special meaning for the Iranian nation. [...] [It was] the same as ‘Islamic awakening,’ which [was] the result of the victory of the big revolution of the Iranian nation” (Kurzman 2012: 162). Such statements were generally not expressions of sympathy for or recognition of the courage and resolve of the protesters in Tunisia and Egypt, but rather the manifestation of a firm determination to exclusively define the revolutions as an Islamic awakening and thus force them into a trajectory that began with the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Khamenei and other leaders tried to create an understanding that the Iranian model was obviously still attractive enough to serve as a role model for others in spite of its setbacks and being condemned by Western and regional opponents. The Islamic Republic of Iran had thus not only received subsequent recognition as the initiator of this Islamic awakening, but was also – according to the logic of its leaders – the “natural” leader in the region.

Yet, the Iranian regime (much to its displeasure) was not a clear beneficiary of the Arab Spring, because Tehran’s interpretation of the uprising’s root causes was challenged right from the beginning – not least in Iran itself. The opposition Green Movement, which had faced relentless persecution since the disputed presidential elections of 2009, applied a completely different interpretation to what was taking place in the Arab world. At the end of January 2011, one of the movement’s most prominent leaders, Mir Hossein Mousavi, declared that the events in Tunis, Sana, Cairo, Alexandria and Suez could be traced back to the second half of June 2009 when millions of Iranian protesters demanded that their democratic rights be respected (Kurzman 2012: 162). On 14 February 2011, Mousavi and the Green Movement’s coleader, Mehdi Karrubi, called for a powerful rally in solidarity with the protesters in the Arab world, as these people were struggling for the same aims as the oppressed opposition in Iran: the removal of autocracies. The Interior Ministry immediately prohibited the demonstrations, and a countrywide wave of persecution ensued.

If the official interpretation of the Arab Spring met an undeniable resistance inside Iran, how was it received in its neighborhood? The following paragraphs intend to highlight the motives and ambitions of Iranian foreign policy and analyze its current impact in the region.

2 Iranian Foreign Policy and the Arab Spring

The Islamic Republic of Iran constitutes a clear exception within the international community given that the Revolution of 1979 (which preceded the Republic’s foundation) is one of the few genuine mass revolutions of the modern age. The Iranian Revolution shares comparable development stages and traits with the French Revolution of 1789 and the Russian Revolution of 1917. As early as 1953, Crane Brinton, a doyen of US political science, attributed to all social mass revolutions a strong missionary ingredient that consisted of the aim to convince the entire world of the “eternal” validity of their visions (Brinton 1953: 196). In 1789, this ap-

plied to civil liberties; in 1917, to communism. In 1979, the charismatic leader of the Iranian Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, made no attempt to conceal his intent to (re)instate Islam with worldwide significance.

2.1 Motives of the Iranian Claim to Leadership

For Ayatollah Khomeini, Islam constituted a complete and perfect system that provided norms and offered guidance for all aspects of life. He also believed that the Islamic religion had universal validity, and he appealed to all Muslims to rise up against their powerful but “degenerate” rulers and create an Islamic state (Husain 1995: 234). The *‘umma* of the era of Muhammad the Prophet and Imam Ali represented his ideal of what should be reestablished. Khomeini viewed the Islamic world in its entirety (i.e., all nation states where Muslims form the majority of the population) as the current manifestation of the *‘umma*. He regarded the Iranian Revolution as nothing less than the starting point for spreading the idea of an Islamic state throughout the world once again. The Revolution was supposed to be this movement’s core as well as a leading example:

The Iranian Revolution does not exclusively belong to Iran, for Islam is not exclusively owned by one specific people. Islam is a revelation made to all mankind, not only Iran. [...] An Islamic movement can therefore not be limited to one specific country, not even just to Islamic countries, for it is the continuation of the Prophet’s revolution.¹

This statement outlined what became the defining credo of early Iranian foreign policy: export of the revolution (*Sudūr-e Enqelāb*). As Khomeini himself declared: “We shall export our revolution to the entire world because it is an Islamic revolution. [...] As long as people on this earth are being oppressed, our struggle shall continue” (Khomeini 1979: 28). Sections 11, 152 and 154 of the Iranian Constitution make direct reference to this task and remain in force today.

In the eyes of Khomeini, the Revolution was thus not exclusively Shiite. He regarded himself and Iranian Muslims, irrespective of their denomination, as having been chosen by God to reinstate Islam’s worldwide significance. In this sense, the augmentation of the revolutionary objective with the aim of liberating all oppressed people in the world (*mostazafin*) – including non-Muslims – was a more important part of Khomeini’s agenda than was the implementation of special Shiite interests.

After Khomeini’s death in 1989, his successor as supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, took the end of the Cold War as the starting point for a new interpretation of the mission defined by Khomeini. He consciously and deliberately affirmed a new bipolarity in the international arena characterized by the Islamic Republic of Iran as the core of a revitalized and po-

1 *Ettela’at*, Tehran, 3 November 1979.

liticized Islam on the one side and the West, its leading power the United States in particular, on the other side. Khamenei claimed that:

In the past the West assigned priority to the Soviet Union and Marxism, but now it has focused its concentration on our region, which has become the most important region for one reason, and that is because it was here that the Islamic Revolution entered the world.²

He believed that the challenge was immense as:

[Iranian revolutionaries] must prove that Western values and the Western way of life are not universally valid, but can be replaced by conscious adherence to Islamic norms. The eyes of other countries are on us, success and failure are being exactly weighed up against each other. It depends on us to make Islam an attractive alternative.³

In terms of being an example, it was no longer necessary for the Islamic Republic of Iran to actively export its revolution. Nevertheless, it was not until 1993 that Khamenei officially abandoned this mission.

In doing so, he was implicitly admitting that the concept as such had failed despite initial humble successes in Lebanon, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Afghanistan. His predecessor, Khomeini, had already tried to blame the “sinister practices” of the West and its regional allies (e.g., encouraging Saddam Hussein to wage war against Iran, 1980–1988) for the curtailment of revolutionary momentum. However, Khomeini was completely unable to see that his doctrine of exporting the revolution had repelled those he persistently sought to reach: oppressed Muslims. The majority of them were Sunnites, and they had clear memories of the hegemonic ambitions of Iran during the Shah’s era. In broad consent with their respective governments – whom they usually viewed skeptically – they interpreted this Islamic sense of mission as an Iranian craving for status, this time cloaked in Shiite apparel.

2.2 Problems and Ambitions of the Iranian Claim to Leadership

After Khomeini’s death, the de facto defeat in the war against Iraq and the concomitant crisis of the system, the regime commenced its search in 1989/1990 for a new approach with which to implement the still-valid sense of its mission. This new method was not supposed to include any direct form of exporting the revolution. Rather, the Islamic leadership declared that primacy was to be assigned to economic reconstruction – in the end, the revolution would survive or fail with a prospering economy. An Islamic republic as a political, economic and cultural “success story” would automatically prevail in the Arab world. Iran was thus to be transformed into a “model society” (*madīne-ye nemūneh*), meaning that the revolution

2 BBC-SWB, Reading, ME/1284A/1, 22 January 1992.

3 *Ettela’at*, Tehran, 3 June 1990.

would no longer have to be exported. Instead, it would present itself to all Muslims as an alternative fit for emulation.

The first two presidents under Khomeini's aegis acted in accordance with this concept even though each of them had individual sets of priorities. President Rafsanjani advocated a pragmatic course according to which foreign policy was primarily supposed to serve Iran's economic recovery after the devastating war against Iraq – an approach continued, in principle, by President Khatami. However, Khatami added a "dialogue of the civilizations" component, which consisted of perseveringly courting the political and economic decision makers of European states as well as China and Japan. This strategy was intended to indirectly compel the United States to action and thus deemed a suitable instrument to overcome Iran's political isolation on a long-term basis.

Thus, Mahmud Ahmadinejad's visit to Khomeini's tomb in August 2005 – immediately after his first election as president – constituted more than a symbolic act. Afterward, he declared that the way of "Imam Khomeini" is the absolute way of the Islamic Republic. According to Ahmadinejad, Khomeini was not only the leader during the Revolution, he remained its guide.⁴ With this statement, the president gave the impression that the Iranian Revolution had, on a higher level, returned to its point of departure. The pragmatism of Rafsanjani's two terms in office belonged to the past and Khatami's willingness to open the country and seek dialogue was forgotten. In contrast, Ahmadinejad and his mentor Khomeini reactivated Khomeini's depiction of the Islamic Republic of Iran as the "true defender of Islam against the West" – a context in which a close link between power consolidation and regional power ambitions became apparent.

It is no coincidence that also in 2005, Supreme Leader Khomeini declared the policy paper "20-Year Vision Plan" as the binding foreign policy guideline according to which Iran would assume the leading economic, scientific and technological position in the region by 2025. Achieving this goal would not only see the Islamic Republic of Iran become a development model for the Islamic world, it would also constitute the realization of the model society project that had been cultivated since Khomeini's death. Additionally, Iran would become a role model due to its pioneering role in the "anti-imperialist" struggle, which was in keeping with the slogan "justice among the peoples and the states." Thus, the mission could not simply be reduced to a task for Shiites or Muslims in general. In order to consolidate the image of a pioneer, Iran constantly reminds the rest of the Islamic world of its merits in the struggle against "imperialism" and "Zionism." The more, for example, the Palestinian problem becomes detached from its predominantly Arab context, the greater are Iran's chances to implement its current foreign policy aim to influence politically active Islamic communities around the world. Considering the pro-Western attitude of most authoritarian Arab regimes prior to the Arab Spring, Ahmadinejad's aggressive criticism of the United States and Israel

4 *International Herald Tribune*, Paris, 21 December 2005.

was at least partially successful in gaining approval from the “Muslim in the street.” For the same reason, he also rejected the offer of normalized relations made to him by his US counterpart, Barack Obama. In fact, US and Israeli opposition was a precondition for the implementation of his foreign policy and security policy strategies.

Since the ousting of Saddam Hussein and the war in Iraq, the position of the Middle Eastern center of resistance against “US and Zionist despotism” had become vacant – a role Iran was eager to fill. Until the Arab Spring (or Islamic awakening according to Tehran’s version of events), Iran’s ambition to play the leading role in the creation of a “chain of resistance” – starting in Tehran and passing through Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and Ramallah before ending in Gaza – was based on its excellent relations with Hezbollah, stable contacts with the Palestinian resistance, strong roots within the region’s Shiite communities, tremendous natural resources and ability to exert massive influence on the events in Iraq (Hroub 2006: 32). If successful in creating this chain, it would be able to substantially harm the political aims of the West.

Nevertheless, Tehran’s regained self-confidence was not so much a result of new concepts, but rather of blatantly weak and unpopular Arab governments unable to counter the Iranian offensive. In fact, Iran’s leadership claim had fallen short of regime expectations. Thus, in February 2011, it saw a huge opportunity to usurp the rebellions taking place in the region for its own project.

3 Reactions in the Arab World

There were various conditions that, at least to some degree, nurtured Iran’s leadership ambitions. For decades, many inhabitants of North Africa and the Middle East had noticed that they had no access to the accelerated and increasingly globalized political, economic and technological developments. Economic recovery, prosperity and progress occurred in other parts of the world, while the squalid conditions in the deprived areas of Khartoum, Algiers or Cairo, for example, had not changed. On the one hand, these destitute communities blamed past colonial and current neocolonial Western policies in the Islamic world for this misery; on the other hand, they condemned their own governments for the implementation of Western development and modernization models. The latter had failed “gloriously,” leaving behind impoverished people whose cultural and religious identities were endangered. As a logical consequence, ideological imports from the West (such as nationalism, socialism and communism) had proved useless in changing autocratic political and stagnating economic conditions. Subsequently, many deprived people (re)discovered their religion, Islam, as an approach to dealing with their current situations. Accordingly, Islam’s significance increased substantially, including in everyday culture. Against this background, there was growing support for all those who claimed that Islam need only be stripped of its “folkloristic elements” and “external additions” in order to function as a progressive and dynamic re-

forming factor appropriate for Muslims. Islamists who trusted that notion became the most influential organized opposition force in the region.

While the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafists and other Islamist groups increasingly gained approval and respect as consistent and authentic representatives of an “Islamic solution,” they remained opposition forces; up to that point in 2011, they had only managed to seize power in Iran in 1979. This latter fact was the primary reason that the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran considered themselves pioneers and praised their country as a leading example. In an interview, the then foreign minister, Ali Akbar Salehi, referred to the “power of facts” and stated that the people of the region did not live in a vacuum: even if Iran was not omnipresent in their thoughts, they had been astutely aware that Iran was the only state in the region where Islam had become the dominant political power. Thus, the commitment to and struggle for an Islamic state would be rewarded (Salehi 2011: 3). As early as 27 February 2011 and for the purpose of consolidating this impression, Iranian leaders invited Muslim leaders from around the world to a conference in Tehran on the “prospects and consequences of the Islamic awakening.” They particularly appreciated the comments made by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (the oldest and most influential Islamist organization) delegate Kamal al-Helbawy, who – according to the Iranian media – expressed his deep gratitude and recognition of “Iran’s leading revolutionary role.”⁵

Yet, no leading Iranian politician referred to the fact that the demonstrations leading to regime change in Tunisia and Egypt by the end of February 2011 had occurred without any Islamic symbols, slogans or demands. “Bread,” “liberty” and “human dignity” were the core demands of the protestors in Tunis and Cairo – by no means the inception of an “Islamic order” or a “divine state” pursuant to the Iranian model. In fact, Iran’s influence was even less significant than feared by Tehran. This will be analyzed in detailed cases studies of particular importance to Iran’s foreign policy strategy.

3.1 Egypt

An assessment of the blogs produced during the first weeks of the uprising in Egypt revealed that a mere 69 of 42,466 tweets made any reference to Iran, and only three of these were written in Arabic. A survey conducted in Alexandria and Cairo just a week before the ousting of Mubarak showed that only 18 percent of those surveyed had any sympathies for the Islamic Republic of Iran, while 47 percent vehemently rejected it. The remaining respondents expressed that they had “no interest” in Iran (Kurzman 2012: 162). Even the Muslim Brotherhood, which was heavily courted by Iran, displayed an extraordinary degree of reserve. Back in Cairo, Kamal al-Helbawy – who had been lauded in Tehran – declared that while his organization was grateful for Iran’s support, it should be noted that the circum-

5 Conference on Islamic awakening held in Tehran. Online: <www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1263085> (25 June 2012).

stances in Egypt were very different to those in Iran and that the Egyptian Revolution was not an Islamic one (Kurzman 2012: 163). Muhammad Mursi, who subsequently became the Muslim Brotherhood's presidential candidate, stated his clear opposition to any Iranian influence: "We are not responsible for statements in Iran [...] we are against a religious state [...] because Islam is against it."⁶ At the same time he made reference to the pluralistic and democratic positions that the Muslim Brotherhood had long been advocating (Wickham 2011). Mursi and other leaders of the Brotherhood were ostensibly well aware of the fact that adopting a course that made them appear too friendly with Iran could cost them the hearts and minds of the Egyptians they needed in the forthcoming elections.

Conscious of this, the Iranian government launched a charm offensive and tried to create the perception of an "equal footing" between the two Islamic centers. Via the Iranian media, Tehran depicted Iran and Egypt as:

two wings of the Islamic world. One wing began to flap with the Iranian Islamic Revolution's triumph, but the other wing was wounded. The other wing, too, has started to flap following the revolution in Egypt and is now in recovery. The Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Revolution move shoulder to shoulder in regard to the regional policies in the Middle East.⁷

As an initial common goal, Iran would probably seek the cancellation of the Camp David Accords (i.e., the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel), which has been described as one of the "most painful wounds in the body of the Islamic community."⁸ The Egyptians, however, would presumably dismiss such assessments and proposals as "paternalistic" because they give the impression that Iran was the arena of the first successful manifestation of an Islamic "Renaissance" in modern history and that Muslim movements in all other Islamic countries remained in the opposition – even those as strong and influential as the Muslim Brotherhood. One should not forget that, according to the Iranian Constitution, the leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran is also the "leader of all Muslims throughout the world."⁹

Nevertheless, when Muhammad Mursi became president, he had good reasons to write new chapters in his country's foreign policy and to widen his leeway by normalizing relations with Iran – a step that his predecessor Mubarak had always vehemently rejected. In August 2012, Mursi took part in the 16th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) hosted by Tehran. Although this was not an official state visit, Mursi was in fact the first Egyptian president to visit Iran since President Sadat in 1978. Shortly before leaving Cairo, he declared that Egypt welcomes "a good relationship with Iran."¹⁰ Tehran sought to maximize

6 *Al-Shuruq*, Cairo, 10 February 2011.

7 *Tehran-e Emroz*, Tehran, 28 June 2012.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Quoted in *Al-Sharq al-awsat*, London, 17 June 2011.

10 *Al-Safir*, Beirut, 28 August 2012.

this opportunity, treating Mursi as a state guest and offering him both a lengthy meeting with Supreme Leader Khamenei and a visit to the nuclear facilities in Bushehr, Natanz and Isfahan. Mursi not only declined both offers, he also used the opening hearing of the summit to call for the ousting of the Assad regime in Syria – thereby indirectly criticizing Assad’s foreign supporters, including Iran. Mursi left Iran on the same day.

The new Egyptian president’s message to Tehran was clear: a good relationship is fine, but it should not harm fruitful relations with other countries, especially those on the Arabian Peninsula. Most Gulf leaders had boycotted the NAM summit in Iran. They, along with many other Arab and Western leaders, were suspicious of the “real intentions” behind Iran’s implementation of a regional project driven by national rather than “Islamic” interests. Mursi would have risked being cut off from the vital economic and financial support provided by the Gulf monarchies if he had supported the Iranian position unconditionally.

In domestic politics, Mursi had to appease the Salafists, who were runners-up in the first parliamentary elections after the downfall of Husni Mubarak. One of their most prominent preachers, Sheikh Ali Ghallab, called Mursi’s visit to Iran “treason to the blood of the Syrians,”¹¹ while other Salafi leaders painted a dark picture of the Shiites – led by Iran – conquering the Sunni heartland of Egypt. Extreme anti-Shiite rhetoric is a hallmark of the Salafists, who believe the Shiites have “abandoned the true faith.” Consequently, Iran’s claim to leadership and self-depiction as a model for the Islamic world was seen to constitute a thinly veiled attempt to impose upon “true” Muslims yet another “un-Islamic system” in addition to the failed Western models.¹² The Muslim Brotherhood quickly responded to those accusations by describing Mursi’s visit to Tehran as an initiative to pressure Iran to halt its support for the Assad regime and by promising that they will never allow Iran to spread Shiism in Sunni countries.

The paradoxical element in this dispute is that Iran never had any intention of spreading the Shi’a faith in Egypt or anywhere else in the Islamic world. This would fundamentally contradict the Islamic Republic’s claim of representing an Islamic rather than a pure Shi’a model for Muslims to emulate. One could hardly imagine a more severe blow to Iran’s intentions than only being recognized as the leader of the world’s Shiites instead of the entire Muslim community. This dispute, however, was abruptly ended by the termination of Mursi’s presidency on 3 July 2013. Even though Mursi did not meet all their expectations, the Iranian hierarchy was by and large satisfied with his normalization of relations given former president Mubarak’s refusal to deal with Tehran. Consequentially, all media mouthpieces condemned the “coup d’état” against the “elected Egyptian president.” As in the following passage, they also employed the well-known propaganda clichés of a “dark” coalition of Zionists, reactionary Arab countries and the West:

11 Ibid.

12 *Al-Shuruq*, Cairo, 6 March 2011.

As to whether the Egyptian army is in alliance with this coalition or not or it has been embroiled in their game, is another issue. But [...] by pushing the army into a confrontation with the people, they will, on the one hand, execute the plan to ensure the removal of Islamists from the political arena and, on the other hand, create conditions for the perpetuation of the crisis in Egypt. Regionally also, the [...] coalition of Zionists, reactionary Arab countries and the West, which through the exploitation of the Egyptian army [...] not only killed Egyptians and intensified the crisis in this country, has sought to silence the cries of oppression of the people of Bahrain and Palestine and prevent the world from paying attention to their lost rights.¹³

In strategic terms, the ousting of Muhammad Mursi and the political marginalization of the Muslim Brotherhood was another severe blow to Iran's Islamic-awakening interpretation of post-Arab Spring developments.

3.2 Libya

The events in Egypt in the summer of 2013 confirmed the view that Iran's plan to enhance its political image by interpreting the Arab Spring as an Islamic awakening held little promise – indeed, it was a claim that became increasingly difficult to maintain with each passing month. Not only had developments in Tunisia and Egypt become increasingly complex in nature, subsequent events in Libya, Bahrain and Yemen unfolded differently than expected by Iran. UN Security Council Resolution 1973 and the subsequent NATO military action against the Gaddafi regime provided the Iranian leadership with its first opportunity to rein in its Islamic awakening propaganda in favor of tried-and-tested anti-US and anti-West slogans. Tehran condemned the operation as the continuation of a series of incidents where the West, driven by its barely concealed interest in gaining control over Libyan oil, disregarded international law (Hanau-Santini and Alessandri 2011: 1).

3.3 Saudi Arabia and the Gulf

When Saudi-led intervention troops entered Bahrain in March 2011 to thwart the popular uprising against the family rule of the Al Khalifa, Iran was presented with the chance to open another front in its propaganda war. According to the Iranian media, the Saudi king and the other monarchs of the Arabian Peninsula had intervened in Bahrain for fear of the revolutionary tide reaching them – especially if one takes into account geographic proximity and the existence of a common border. One report contended that the uprising in Bahrain “has had great costs for Arab countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the West, because it has revealed the Bahraini people's dynamism, which can constitute a role model for the people of

13 *Siyasat-e Ruz*, Tehran, 15 August 2013.

Saudi Arabia.”¹⁴ By tolerating the uprising in Bahrain, the other monarchs would have been permanently concerned about the toppling of the old ruling regime and the introduction of a new one, which – by all expectations – would be hostile to them and refuse to succumb to their authority.

In fact, the Iranian media’s assessment of the Gulf rulers’ motives for intervening militarily in Bahrain was not so dissimilar to more neutral, even academic, interpretations. For example, the prominent anthropologist from the University of London, Madhawi al-Rashid, wrote the following:

At this level, the blatant Saudi interference is seen at the level of three revolutions. It oppressed the revolution in Bahrain in a direct way, contained it in Yemen and supported it in Syria, which raises numerous questions regarding the Saudi role in the region. Saudi Arabia perceived the toppling of the Bahraini regime as being a direct threat to it, as it heralded the changing of the royal sheikhdom system of governance which is not only deeply rooted in Saudi Arabia, but also in the entire Gulf region. [...] In Yemen, Saudi Arabia wished to contain the repercussions of the revolution which heralded the changing of the ruling team that is controlled by it on the political and economic levels, thus introducing an initiative to save that old team and the submission to Riyadh.¹⁵

The Al Saud and other Gulf rulers, however, did not only fear the knock-on effect of a popular uprising, but also an imminent Iranian victory. The presence of a Shiite majority in Bahrain gave rise to their suspicions that an insurgent victory would, in fact, constitute a success for Tehran. Bahrain’s relationship with Saudi Arabia has often been compared to that between Puerto Rico and the United States: an associated free state. How would Washington react to an anti-US change of power in San Juan (Teitelbaum 2011: 2)? Hence, as in the case of Egypt, the prominent role of the denominational factor in the battle over Bahrain was a bitter pill to swallow for the Iranian leadership. How could it uphold the myth of an Islamic awakening of the entire Muslim community when the uprising in Bahrain was being misinterpreted (in Tehran’s eyes) as a simple conflict between the Shiite majority against the Sunni minority? In response, Iran attempted to ostentatiously ignore the Shiite aspect of the conflict and accused the Saudi leaders of repeatedly opposing the clearly audible wish for change on the Arabian Peninsula in a bid to preserve their own power and the power of the West (Hannau-Santini and Alessandri 2011: 2). Although Bahrain might have had some potential for Iran’s vision of an Islamic awakening, the developments there were clearly marginalized by the events in Syria.

14 Ibid.

15 *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, London, 6 August 2012.

3.4 Syria

To the dismay of Tehran, the uprising in Syria put Iran in a similar situation to the one that Saudi Arabia was facing in Bahrain. Syria, under the friendly government of Bashar al-Assad, is of extraordinary strategic significance to Iran. Since the beginning of the Iraq-Iran War in 1980, Syria has been Iran's most trustworthy ally in the region and has provided Tehran with the ability to influence events in the Eastern Mediterranean – especially developments concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict. One could argue that losing Syria would constitute Iran's biggest strategic defeat for 30 years, resulting in a loss of strategic access to Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and the Palestinian issue, as well as a physical presence along the Israeli border (Salem 2011: 1). Given its geopolitical significance, Tehran clearly sided with Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian regime from the outset. Although, it did not send troops to intervene (as did Saudi Arabia in Bahrain), Iran supplied Damascus with arms, money and military instructors. Iran's support, however, could not compensate for the Syrian regime's lack of know-how in dealing with civil protests. During the first days of the uprising, it was the army – rather than a specially trained police force – that was putting down the protests. This resulted in extensive casualties among both the protesters and government forces (Venetis 2011: 20). Eventually, there was increasing evidence that Iran was contributing special units from its Revolutionary Guard forces to support Assad's efforts to deal with the uprising.

The more Iranian support for Assad became obvious, the more regime opponents inside and outside of Iran began to sardonically ask whether Iran only supported the "people's will" in countries whose governments had alliances with the West, and not in those allied with Iran (Alfoneh 2011: 35). As a consequence, the entire construction of the Iranian interpretation of the Arab Spring as an Islamic awakening risked being undermined by its actions in Syria. To address this contradiction, Iranian propaganda began to allege that the events in Syria could not be compared to those in Egypt and Tunisia, because the former were not part of a real revolution as they lacked certain requirements (e.g., the commitment of the people, a clear ideology and a stringent leadership). Tehran argued, that the situation in Syria was, on the contrary, akin to a civil war given the presence of specific demands (e.g., territorial secession, autonomy and independence), which had been incited by foreigners pursuing their own interests.

This external interference became the second ingredient of Iran's counterpropaganda concerning Syria. Iran's link to the Arab East and to the Middle East conflict via Syria was reinterpreted as a chain of resistance against both "arrogant" and Western powers. They had no intention of daring to use the differences between Shiites and Sunnites to weaken that bond. The editorial of a conservative newspaper stated that the chain was like a "spiritual link" that had:

infused the spirit of resistance in many countries in the Middle East region. If they were able to cut off the middle link in that chain by making use of the potentials of the

Salafi and Takfiri movements and by sowing the seeds of dissension among Muslims [...] they would have been able to disconnect the main link, which is the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the third and fourth links, which are Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine, respectively.¹⁶

Later, the editorial quoted Supreme Leader Khamenei: “The reality about the Syrian issue is that the arrogant front is intent on destroying the chain of resistance in the region, which exists in the neighborhood of the usurping Zionist regime.”¹⁷ Interestingly enough, the notion of the Islamic awakening was removed from the propaganda arsenal in the Syrian case.

4 The Struggle for the Prerogative of Interpretation of the Arab Spring inside Iran

Since the severe crisis caused by the presidential elections of 2009, the Iranian regime had been eagerly looking for chances to regain legitimacy. In this context, a regional and international recognition of an interpretation of the Arab Spring as the long overdue confirmation of Iranian “revolutionary” policies would have been more than welcome. From a diametrically opposed position, the remorselessly persecuted Green Movement not only had an interest in refusing the regime’s claim, but also in branding it as “anachronistic” and similar to the Arab dictatorships that had just been ousted. The demonstrators who had – despite prohibition – gathered in several Iranian cities on 14 February 2011 used slogans that were unambiguous (e.g., “Mubarak, Ben Ali, it is now the turn of Seyed Ali [Khamenei]”) and referred to violent repression (e.g., “Those in Iran with motorcycles or those in Cairo with camels, death to the dictator”) (Alfoneh 2011: 37–38). For the Iranian opposition, it was important to create the impression of a stable connection between the Green Movement in Iran and the protest movement in the Arab world. In this regard, the Green Movement posted the following statement on one of its websites: “In 2009 the Egyptians saw the protest rallies with millions of Iranians and asked themselves: ‘Why can’t we do the same?’ ‘Why are we weak and without strength?’” (Borszik 2011: 5). The logical conclusion should be that the Green Movement was a precursor of the Arab Spring – it had “inspired” people in Egypt and Tunisia, and the success of the protests in the Arab world was, in turn, catalyzing the Iranian opposition movement. Some bloggers even went as far as to term the “people striving for freedom in Iran, Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan and Algeria” as “Green Movements of the regional nations” (Borszik 2011: 5). With the increasing persecution of the Green Movement by the regime, the optimistic analysis of the former was replaced with a certain sobriety. In the long run, however, the characterization of the protest movements as a regional (not only Arab) phenomenon remained important. As Mohammadi (2011) points out:

¹⁶ *Resalat*, Tehran, 20 November 2012.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

The protest movement may have many components, but its common denominator is its strong roots within the people and its striving for democracy. [...] Neither a single party, nor a specific ideology dominate the protests, nor are prominent leaders discernible [...] thus the shared demands are what define it as a unit.

In the early days of the Arab revolts, the Iranian leadership tolerated voices in the local media that called for unconditional support of all popular uprisings against authoritarian rulers. An editorial in a reformist daily commented, for example, that “one must not abandon the support of people’s demands in Syria, as in the long term it would harm Iran’s foreign policy.”¹⁸ But the speed with which the supposedly stable regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya were swept away and the pace with which the regimes in Syria and Yemen came under sudden pressure undoubtedly gave rise to great concerns within the Iranian leadership and significantly contributed to its knee-jerk, harsh reaction. The alternative of yielding to the (partial) demands of the reform movement did not even merit consideration. On the contrary, Syria became the only case where the Iranian leadership claimed and propagated similarities with the domestic events of 2009 in Iran – in both cases, unrest had been caused by “foreign elements” (Granmayeh 2011: 2).

The two presidents, Ben Ali and Mubarak, faced a similar decision. Their reliance on the belief that the opposition was disorganized, without program and thus weak did not prevent their ousting. Therefore, Tehran may have also made the wrong decision by choosing a strategy of relentless repression – though the Iranian hierarchy still deemed its position fundamentally different to that of the ousted potentates in Cairo, Tunis and Tripoli as it believed that a revolution against this type of regime had already occurred in Iran in 1979. Therefore, the Green Movement and even some moderate reformers constituted the “counterrevolution.” Consequently, the regime’s interpretation of the Arab Spring and that of the opposition remained incompatible.

5 Conclusion

The interpretation of the Arab Spring as a delayed extension of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 is far-fetched. The international circumstances at the end of the 1970s were largely shaped by the Cold War, and the clergy in Iran monopolized the revolutionary agenda to an extent that was and has remained unparalleled. Carried by a messianic martyr cult, Ayatollah Khomeini implemented a programmatically coherent model for an Islamic state within one year of the Shah’s ousting. Even though Khomeini never ceased emphasizing the ecumenical, “pan-Islamic” nature of the Iranian Revolution, Shiism was a major factor behind the success of 1979. Iranian Twelver Shiism, for instance, obligates the faithful to agree with the doctrine of a jurisconsult, thus firmly establishing the principle of adherence. In this context, Khomeini

18 *Mardom-Salari*, Tehran, 7 April 2011.

only had to transfer this principle from the religious to the political sphere in a revolutionary act. Conversely, Sunni Islam does not endow clergymen with such superior positions. With the exception of the founder, Hassan al-Banna, and one of the most influential spiritual guides, Seyed Qutb, the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood have little theological education – if any at all (Keddie 2012: 151). After Khomeini's death, the Iranian leadership concluded that it would be counterproductive to export their specific revolution. Instead it was deemed far more important to present an exemplary success story that could be emulated. Under these circumstances, Iran (according to Tehran's official interpretation) would also remain the undisputed originator of the "Arab awakening."

The Iranian leadership was not really surprised by the reaction of the neighboring Arab regimes, especially the monarchies. For rulers in the Gulf, it does not make any difference whether Iranian foreign policy goals are based on regional interests, sectarian beliefs, or nationalistic roots dating back to the era of the Persian Empire. "Indeed, all this represents an extension of the foreign politics and a natural reflection of the Iranian state, which is based on the principle of the [Walayat al-] Faqih rule."¹⁹ What the Iranian leaders really lamented was their failure to bring the Islamists onside, especially the Muslim Brotherhood branches in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon. Instead of establishing a relationship with them on the basis of Islam (a relationship that would unite all Islamists in the entire region with the aim of establishing Islamic regimes, which would rule by sharia and confront all sorts of external challenges), the moderate Islamists made – if at all – polite and very general expressions of sympathy to the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Salafists, however, explicitly projected an anti-Iranian and anti-Shiite image. Therefore, on balance, Iran was not among the beneficiaries of the Arab Spring. The notion of an Islamic awakening did not resonate with the Arab insurgents, while favoritism toward individual insurgent movements like that in Bahrain was generally interpreted as a selective measure employed in pursuance of Iran's own hegemonic ambitions.

Meanwhile, the analysis of the Arab Spring by the Iranian Green Movement primarily served propagandistic and political rather than academic interests. Yet, it cannot be denied that the parallels between Iran in 2009 and the Arab world in 2011 – particularly with regard to the international framework conditions – are far more apparent than those between 1979 and 2011. The main demands of the Green Movement were the same as those of the Arab Spring insurgents: freedom, respect for human rights, social justice, and an end to corruption, nepotism and isolation from the international community. According to ratings by Freedom House, Transparency International and the World Bank, Iran even exceeds the figures of the ousted regimes of Ben Ali and Mubarak in Tunisia and Egypt with regard to corruption, mismanagement and oppression (Sadjadpour 2011: 3). However, these demands originate from the interests of the middle classes in the urban centers of North Africa and the

¹⁹ *Al-Jazirah, al-Riyadh*, 13 May 2012.

Middle East, not from the “oppressed” and “disenfranchised” who were the target group of Khomeini and his followers’ message.

Nevertheless, despite these similarities, the Green Movement always forgets to mention that its initial aim was not regime change, but rather the repeal of election results. Mousavi and Karrubi are not only well known as figureheads of the Green Movement, but also as representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran – the former served as prime minister (1981–1989), and the latter was Speaker of Parliament (1989–1996, 2000–2004). They have endeavored to bring about reforms of the Islamic Republic’s system, not its abolition. In the wake of the repression it has faced, the Green Movement has become radicalized. But those fighting for the end of the “rule of the jurisconsult,” and thus for a different republic, have neither a concise alternative program nor leaders with sufficient integrative power. In consequence, their appeal and their potential as a leading example for the Arab Spring has remained limited. Wael Ghonim, one of the best-known activists of the Egyptian insurgency, was once asked if he was wearing his green armband as a token of solidarity with the Iranian opposition. Surprised, he answered that the color “was just a coincidence,” but he was “happy” the connection had been made (Kurzman 2012: 162). Slightly more aware of probable similarities, one of Ghonim’s companions included the Green Movement in a chain of other recent protest movements, including the “Salt March” in India, Solidarity in Poland, the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine, the “Cedar Revolution” in Lebanon and the “Lilly Revolution” in Kyrgyzstan. This demonstrates a respect for the Green Movement, but does not assign it a prominent or leading role. Consequently, both the regime and the Green Movement should refrain from claiming that they exerted a defining influence on the events that were taking place in Arab states. With regard to the regime, former president Rafsanjani made the following sober judgment: “I maintain that the Islamic revolution serves many Muslims worldwide as an inspiration. Our current policies, however, make it extraordinarily hard for them to admit this.”²⁰

However, the Islamic Republic of Iran may, in fact, become a beneficiary of the Arab Spring in an unexpected way. The protests and revolts are altering the overall strategic constellation of the region. Old factions are dissolving; new ones, emerging. In general, Arab foreign policy has become more self-confident and is no longer directed by external powers. Arab governments no longer automatically accept the pariah status assigned to Iran by the West.

These states are now setting foreign policy according to national rather than Western interests. Overall, Iran is profiting from these pragmatic considerations – though it is still not a direct beneficiary as wished by the regime. On the whole, Iran has played a far more marginal role in the Arab Spring than imagined in Tehran. The benefits of the changes may become apparent in an indirect manner and, at best, in the long run.

20 *Jomhori-ye Eslami, Tehran*, 9 August 2011.

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