

The Arab Uprisings: Opportunities and Challenges for Iran

Written by Nader Entessar

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NADER ENTESSAR, APR 12 2011

The ongoing people's uprisings in the Arab countries against autocratic rulers have provided Iran with both challenges and opportunities in the Middle East and beyond. Will these momentous events enhance Iran's foreign policy opportunities, or will they ultimately lead to further isolation and strategic loneliness for Iran? Iranian leaders, from the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei to President Ahmadinejad to the *Majlis* Speaker Ali Larijani and many civil and military personalities in the Islamic Republic have publicly praised the Arab uprisings as having been inspired by Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1979 and analyzed them within an Islamic framework. Similarly, the country's "Green Movement" has lent its support to the Arab uprisings and has interpreted them within the framework of the Iranian people's revolt against authoritarianism in the aftermath of the disputed 2009 presidential election in the Islamic Republic. However, neither of these two interpretations is correct. The template for the Arab uprisings should be seen within the context of the internal dynamics of the Arab world and changing constellation of power in the region. What is certain is that the political tsunami in today's Middle East will have strategic and foreign policy repercussions for Iran.

Perhaps the most positive development, so far, for Iran seems to be a willingness on the part of Cairo and Tehran to transform their three-decade old acrimonious relationship, as evidenced by positive statements from the new Egyptian leadership and Iranian officials towards each other. Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi has offered his readiness to travel to Cairo in order to normalize Iranian-Egyptian relations. Such a development, if it comes to fruition, will be a major positive development for not only both countries but the region as a whole. What may emerge is an Egypt that, like Turkey, will have normal relations with the West and Iran as opposed to an Egypt that anchors Washington's anti-Iran axis in the Middle East.

On the other side of the spectrum, the brutal suppression of the Arab people's uprisings in the Persian Gulf region, which has been aided and abetted by Saudi Arabia's direct intervention in Bahrain and its indirect involvement in Yemen, have widened the bitter divide between Sunnis and Shi'as. As Michael Brenner has correctly pointed out, the al-Khalifa and the al-Saud regimes in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, respectively, have "laid down a line of blood" that no one can ignore. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait and other family-ruled dictatorships in the Persian Gulf have spawned a story blaming Iran for their people's peaceful uprisings and their democratic aspirations. Unfortunately, the Obama administration's vacillating positions toward the democratic movements in the Middle East, especially in the Persian Gulf where Iranophobia reigns supreme, have emboldened the Arab regional dictators to use brutal tactics to deal with the legitimate aspirations of their people and use the Shi'a bogeyman (read Iran) to widen the sectarian divide and heighten political tension in the region. This will certainly present a major challenge to Iran's regional foreign policy and strategic goals.

Added to the aforementioned crisis is the dizzying rate of militarization in the pro-Western Arab countries of the region. For example, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Saudi Arabia ranks among the top 15 countries with the highest military expenditures, and the country experienced a 66.9 percent increase in its military expenditures in the period 2000-2009. Similarly, the mini-state of the United Arab Emirates accounted for 57 percent of the imports of major conventional weapons in the region in the period 2005-2009. Given the insecurity faced by the hereditary Arab regimes of the Persian Gulf, the current trend towards further militarization

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of the region will continue to accelerate. This will present a major challenge to Iran's national security in the near-to-medium term. In other words, the combination of political volatility and militarization will make the region more susceptible to outside intervention and regional power plays.

In the Persian Gulf, the acquisition of sophisticated weapons by the Gulf states has not resulted in a balance of terror that may act as a deterrent against the use of force by regional adversaries against each other. Today, what exists in the Persian Gulf is an asymmetrical military balance against Iran. This asymmetrical balance has been exacerbated since the mid-1990s as many Gulf states began to enhance their air-strike capabilities and enlarge their air forces. The role of the United States in perpetuating the asymmetrical imbalance against Iran and the Islamic Republic's perception of the U.S. military goals in the region has created a siege mentality among Iran's leadership. Since the end of the Gulf War in 1991 and especially since the occupation of Iraq in 2003, the United States has assumed the overwhelming responsibility for the security of the Persian Gulf. As the stability of pro-Western Arab regimes are threatened by popular uprisings, the rulers of these regimes will most likely seek further "protection" by aligning themselves more with anti-Iranian outside forces, thus perpetuating the vicious circle of insecurity among the Iranian leaders. How to deal with this spiraling crisis will be a formidable security challenge to Iran.

Last, but not least, the implications of the Arab uprising for the Islamic Republic may be manifested in its internal developments and intensification of popular uprising inside Iran. In other words, will there be a spill-over effect of the Arab people's uprising in Iran? If so, will this lead to a nonviolent movement, à la the Green Movement of 2009, or will it become violent? Can the center hold if we witness another popular eruption in the country?

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