

## **THE RESPONSE OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN TO THE ARAB SPRING<sup>1</sup>**

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Some key observations have to be made at the outset of this analysis. Firstly the I.R. of Iran is not, in the strict sense of the word, a conventional state seeking to enhance perceived Iranian national interests. The foundational pillars of the Iranian system since 1979 ask for the pursuit of wider interests defined in terms of religious affiliation. It is, at the risk of over-simplification, a theocratic administration infused with a degree of local representation. Secondly, by Western standards, the Islamic Republic is not a successful illustration of political administration after thirty three years in power. Political Islam, seen through a conventional prism as enunciated by Olivier Roy, can hardly be termed as triumphant. Thirdly the Raison d'être of the Iranian Revolution is now almost exclusively focused on the external environment. The rivalry of *Shi'a* political system in Iran with the *Wahhabis* in Saudi Arabia is a prime example.

In view of the above it may be noted that if the Arab Spring denotes the change of the status quo in the region, then the fear of a domino effect would certainly alarm the Islamic Republic. Specifically two factors may give rise to concern. One is the disillusioned young in Iran that comprise the majority of the population. Social malaise such as economic hardship with its serious consequences can be the underlying cause that can be triggered by factional fighting in Iranian politics. The other is the history of dissent, associated with most revolutions, that has also been present in the Islamic Republic. Organised opposition, in a variety of political settings, has proven itself a challenger competing for power almost since the early days of the Revolution in 1979.

The Iranian system has been able to neutralize opposition deftly via three mechanisms. Firstly, it has effectively mobilized its supporters whenever street politics has required it to do so. Religious zealotry has been instrumental in such mobilizations. Secondly key figures, loyal to the Islamic Republic and its tenets, have been given space to be in key positions leading and/or diffusing opposition, in effect cutting the sharp edges of internal dissent. Lastly, either through co-opting or less than friendly deterrent measures chances of unrest have been minimized.

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Can the Arab Spring trigger instability in the Islamic Republic of Iran? The intelligent internal mechanism referred to above together with a degree of international acquiescence render a direct answer rather difficult. The latter refers to regional and global players, who due to economic and strategic interests may feel uneasy about the prospects of fundamental change in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The I.R. of Iran's strategic interests are defined by religious/ideological imperatives. Accordingly the country has three main states and two non-state allies in the region.

First is Iraq, which has a majority *Shi'a*-led government with Prime Minister Maliki. Second is the Lebanese government led by Prime Minister Mighati and supported by Hizbollah. Third is the minority Alawite government of Syria led by Bashar Assad. The non-state actors comprise of Hizbollah in Lebanon headed by Hassan Nasrollah and the Islamic Jihad. Though the former are Shi'ites the latter belong to the Sunni sect of Islam. Hamas, a Sunni ally of the Islamic Republic until recently has now apparently parted ways and is seeking closer ties with the mainstream Arab governments.

Iran does not seem to have a monolithic approach to those countries that have been affected by the Arab spring. Starting with Egypt, the two countries have had acrimonious relations almost since the beginning of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The naming of a main street in Tehran after the assassin of the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat did not help their relations either. During the uprising in Egypt the Islamic Brotherhood was quick to rebuff claims made by I. R. of Iran that its 2011 Revolution was anything like that of Iran in 1979. After the ousting of Mubarak, however, Egyptian authorities allowed the passage of two Iranian military vessels through the Suez Canal, which could indicate a potential for normalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries. However, for as long as the nationalist US-trained Egyptian army remains in power it will steer the country clear of a fundamentalist path.

In the Libyan case, the warm relations with Gaddafi in the early years of the Iranian Revolution, had given way in the past decade or so to a more luke-warm mode. In the eyes of many *Shi'a* zealots Gaddafi was responsible for the disappearance of a leading figure, Imam Mousa Sadr just before the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Iran tacitly supported the uprising against the Libyan ruler in 2011.

Iran has been supportive of change in Yemen and in Bahrain. The latter in particular has been of interest since its population is mainly *Shi'a* but the government is led by minority *Sunnis*.

As for Syria, the Islamic Republic has been most vehemently against any change in the ruling establishment and has allegedly directed its resources towards that goal. The reasons for that are multi-fold. Firstly Syria has been the most important Arab ally of the Islamic Republic throughout and even supported the *Shi'a* Iran during the Iran-Iraq war (an alliance that has of course been hugely rewarding for Syria, financially and otherwise). Secondly Damascus is the route through which Iran provides support for Hizbollah and thus maintains an influence in Lebanon. Thirdly Syria's borders with Israel render it strategically significant.

Ironically the Islamic Republic does not wish to see a religious government in Syria. Such an eventuality would probably mean a *Sunni*-driven administration in Damascus that would in all likelihood be at variance with Iranian objectives in Lebanon and elsewhere. The shift of alliances, should Assad fall, could bring Syria and Saudi Arabia much closer to one another. Together with other factors such a development could increase the Islamic Republic's exposure to outside pressure including the risk of a military assault.