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## "Iran's Interests and Values and the 'Arab Spring'"

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Pro-Iranian government female demonstrators protest against U. Barack Obama & Libyan leader M Gadhafi in support of anti-govern & Yemeni protestors in front of th in Tehran, Iran, Feb. 24, 2011.

AP Photo

Iran's "interests" and "values" have great significance in its response to the popular uprisings known as the "Arab Spring." In dealing with these regional crises, Iran's main challenge has been to balance these two different drivers in conducting its foreign policy.

Regarding the preservation of Iran's interests, the significance of recent events is mainly due to the effects of change, foremost change of current governments on bilateral relations with Iran and regional stability, issues related to the region of power, and the role of regional and trans-regional actors. Regarding the preservation of Iran, these developments are significant due to the ideals of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which as support popular movements, challenge domestic and regional interference by foreign powers, "Islamic unity."

From this perspective, the Arab Spring can be analyzed from three perspectives.

First, with respect to Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen, Iran's priorities are focused on preserving its interests. Egypt bears more significance for Iran: Egypt is important geo-strategically, has a large population, and a long history, culture, and enduring identity as a nation-state. It also possesses a dynamic society which makes it an important player in both the Arab and Islamic worlds.

Iran seeks closer relations with the future government of Egypt, irrespective of whether its current government is secular-nationalistic or Islamic-ideological. Egypt has sidelined former President Hosni Mubarak, leading an anti-Iranian coalition in the Arab world—and Iran would like to capitalize on this development.

An enhanced bilateral relationship would depend on how the new Egyptian government views its regional role. For the new Egyptian government, it would be significant both regionally and internationally to establish a balanced and close relationship with Iran, one of the most powerful non-Arab nations in the Middle East and the most prominent player in the Persian Gulf region—a hub of global commercial and financial exchanges. Enhanced bilateral relations could empower Egypt's negotiating stance in the Middle East, especially concerning the Arab-Israeli peace process and the comprehensive nuclear deal of the Middle East.

Contrary to the prevailing view in the West, the more pronounced role of the Islamist trends in Egypt, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt that suggest a different ideological model of political Islam, would not necessarily lead to an enhancement of Iran-Egypt relations. Iran's priority, as stressed by Foreign Minister Ali-Akbar Salehi, is fortifying mutual respect and preserving Iran's national interests.

As for Libya, Iran's perspective is different. In the past, the two countries had established a close and realistic relationship. The Gaddafi regime had supported Iran in the 1980–1988 war with Iraq. The issue of prominent Shia leader Imam Musa al-Sadr, who disappeared during a visit to Libya in 1979, negatively affected Iran-Libya relations. Overall, Iran's policy has been supportive of the popular movements in Libya.

Yet an important challenge for Iran here is the intervention of North Atlantic Treaty Organization and other Western forces in the Libyan crisis. Iranian leaders feel that the West's policy of connecting the security of the region to the security of the world and thereby justifying any preemptive attack in the name of preserving Western democratic values such as fostering democracy or fighting terrorism, etc. will continue to lead to a broad interpretation of using force in the region—with a subsequent increase in foreign military presence which can be a source of extremism and instability as witnessed in the case of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The developments in Tunisia and Yemen are in the same category due to the level of the impact these countries have on Iran's interests and values. Here again, Iran has cautiously attempted to pursue a balanced bilateral relationship with each to preserve regional stability, on the one hand, and to respond to popular demands, in spite of the Shii-Sunni differences (in the case of Yemen), on the other, while attempting to support moderate and negotiated solutions.

Second, concerning Syria and Jordan, Iran's policies again are formulated to preserve its strategic national interests in its bilateral relations with each of these states. Syria and Jordan each have a role in the region's political-security equations, especially towards Hezbollah and Hamas and the Arab League peace process.

Syria has a crucial role in connecting Iran strategically to the Levant. Therefore, contrary to other countries in the Arab world, Iran's has had a distinct stance towards developments in Syria. In order to sustain an Iranian-Syrian coalition, Iran has cautiously reacted to developments stressing the role of forces such as i.e. the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, who are fanning the flames, but supported popular political demands only to the extent that it does not weaken Syrian national security or its sovereign power in its conflict with Israel.

In the same vein, and due to the important role of Jordan in the regional equations and political dynamics in the Arab world, Iran has reacted cautiously to developments in Jordan and prioritized its relations with the country on the basis of enhancing bilateral relations. For instance, despite existing domestic criticism and calls to cancel an already extended invitation to King Abdullah to visit Iran, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has just expressed that this visit is still on the government's agenda. The main concern raised by the opponents of this invitation to the Jordanian king is that the king's presence will damage Iran's image within the Islamic world.

Third, concerning Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, Iran's policy towards these two countries has been formulated to preserve both its interests and values. This is especially obvious in the case of Bahrain which is strategically located in the immediate circle of Iran's political-security interests in the sensitive and important region of the Persian Gulf. The Saudis' military intervention in Bahrain, supported by the United States, is mainly aimed at dominating and controlling the political-security trends in the country and thereby the entire Persian Gulf region. Some Western analysts have even argued that the main motivation behind the Barack Obama administration's current policy in the region is to contain Iran.

If it succeeds, therefore, this policy has the potential to change the balance of power against Iran's interests not only in the Persian Gulf but in the entire Middle East. The Saudis' intervention, with the support of extra-regional powers, the necessary pretext to interconnect regional and global security (international energy security) thereby prolonging their presence, will in all likelihood lead to intensified military instability. This is against Iran's national interests.

Bahrain is also important from Iran's values-based perspective. While the majority of the Bahraini population is Shii, Iran is also a Shii-majority country which naturally, just like other countries, is sympathetic towards this shared cultural-religious heritage. This sympathy even existed during the Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's regime, which had no ideological predilection towards Shii demands in Bahrain and Iraq during the 1970s.

Ever since the crisis in Bahrain started, different groups in Iran, such as the seminaries and clerics, bazaar, academics, intellectuals and students, filmmakers, writers, and the general public have expressed their sense of solidarity with the people of Bahrain and have vehemently opposed the brutal actions of Bahraini Shii citizens. Here the toughest stance was taken by the Iranian Majlis (Parliament) under Ahmadinejad's government, when MPs in a statement expressed that the foreign intervention in Bahrain is equivalent to "playing with the fire." This shows how sensitive the issue of Bahrain is among Iranians.

Iranian public.

By dispatching troops to Bahrain that had been green lighted by the United States, Saudi Arabia and the United States made a serious and strategic mistake. While the Bahraini protests were largely politico-economic demands, discrimination, and frustration, they are now turning into a sectarian Sunni issue. The outcome is evinced by the reactions in the Shia world, not only in Iran but also in Lebanon, etc., the result of which could provoke more sectarian divisiveness, which is one of the precarious conflicts in the Middle East and the main source of instability for regional and international security.

Iran's policy towards the Shia population in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia was also based on supporting the same general demands of Shias while attempting to reconcile its relations with the Saudi government based on preserving the two states' bilateral interests.

This policy has three justifications. First, Iran avoids a Shia-Sunni rivalry in the region and advocates Islamic unity. Second, President Ahmadinejad seeks good relations with neighboring Arab countries before the crises started in the region, his special envoys visited Yemen, Egypt, and Jordan to improve bilateral relations with these states. Third, Iran is very careful that its value-based support of the Arab world's popular uprisings does not provide a pretext to these Arab states to connect the demands of Shia populations to the issue of "regime change" with foreign support. Iran is not attempting to overthrow the Shia-dominated government in Bahrain and only considers the demands of fellow Shias in Saudi Arabia in the context of the current Saudi government.

Thus, given the distinct features and the level of significance of the Arab governments in Iran's relations and regional policy, Iran should follow a specific relationship with each Arab country. For example, Egypt, considering its importance in the region, Iran's policy should prioritize the bilateral improvement of relations. This state of affairs is occurring now. Regarding Syria, Iran should follow a realistic approach based on preserving its strategic interests in the region and regulate its stance according to the existing realities of Syrian society. It seems that the current alliance between Iran and Syria, even with the occurrence of some changes in Syria, will remain intact. This is most evident in the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah special relationship in dealing with the same Israeli threat. Lastly, regarding Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, Iran's policy should simultaneously equate Iran's interests and values with the Saudi Arabian regimes amounts to supporting popular demands without damaging its bilateral relationships with the Saudi Arabian regimes.

Iran will not initiate any military expedition in the Persian Gulf in the near future, because this would fortify the adversarial and entrenched strategy of the United States and Israel, which regard Iran as the main source of regional instability. Such a policy will become even more precarious if it relates to Iran's nuclear program. It is highly unlikely that Iran will make the same mistake as Saudi Arabia did with Bahrain, since this policy would increase political-security divisions in the region and provide an ideal justification for foreign forces by legitimizing their continued presence in the region.

Meanwhile, by means of active diplomacy, Iran should seize the moment and play a constructive role in order to solve regional crises. One policy could be to initiate a regional conference in Tehran to bring together all concerned regional and international actors, such as Turkey, the United States, the European Union, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Qatar, etc., aimed at finding an immediate solution to stop the conflict in Bahrain. In participating in regional conferences, Iran can also use its regional role and influence to find a solution for settling the crises between large sections of these Arab states' disgruntled populations and governments of the region.

Although the developments of the "Arab Spring" have increased Iran's regional role, they have also raised the potential to step up the usual concerns regarding the motives behind Iran's involvement in the Arab world's politics. An active diplomacy should somehow avoid any acts that may imply Iran's involvement in the domestic affairs of these countries that could damage not only bilateral relations, but also the nationalist sentiments of these Arab societies.

*Statements and views expressed in this op-ed are solely those of the author and do not imply endorsement by Harvard University, Harvard Kennedy School, or the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.*

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