

# BULLETIN

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## Iran's Reactions to the Arab Spring and the Crisis in Syria

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*Iranian authorities initially did not hide their satisfaction in the collapse of the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, but their reactions to successive Arab revolts were more balanced. A growing concern for the Iranian government has been raised with the escalation of the crisis in Syria, which might result in the loss of a strategic ally and a favourable situation in the Middle East. History and internal problems are also influencing the Iran's calculations.*

**Iran's Reaction to the Arab Spring.** The collapse of the dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt were seen in Tehran as proof of weakening U.S. influence and an opportunity to strengthen the regional position of Iran. In the official propaganda, it has been stressed that the Arab revolts constitute an "Islamic awakening", inspired by the thoughts of Ruhollah Khomeini as well as the achievements of the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979). This triumphalism was soon replaced by a more balanced reaction to the "Pearl Revolution" in Bahrain. In this case, Iran has not declared itself very strongly on the side of the secular and Shiite opposition to the conservative monarchy. Nevertheless, the intervention of Saudi Arabia in Bahrain (March 2011) was officially condemned by the Iranian Foreign Minister.

Caution also characterized Iran's reaction to other crises. In Libya, it feared the influence of the Gulf states or al-Qaeda. After the overt support of NATO for the Libyan rebels, Iran also joined in criticism of Muammar Qaddafi. When the situation gradually tilted in favour of the rebels, Iranian authorities warned them against having too close of ties with Western countries and invited rebel representatives to visit Tehran.

Iran has also levelled strong criticism against the Yemeni regime of President Ali Saleh. But this rhetoric was not accompanied by material support for the anti-regime Shiite tribe of al-Houthis. As for Yemen and Bahrain, Iran took into consideration the influence of Saudi Arabia in those countries, trying to avoid new disputes in its complex relations with Riyadh. Obviously this restraint in rhetoric contrasts with the failed Iranian plot against the Saudi ambassador in Washington, D.C. (disclosed by U.S. authorities in October 2011). The pressure from Teheran for its rapid implementation, suggests that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has considered some kind of retaliation campaign for the increase in Saudi activities in the Middle East.

Even more complicated calculations are evident in Iran's policy towards Syria. Iran initially gave the Syrian regime important assistance, including blocking the Internet and sending IRGC advisors. However, with the prolongation of the Syrian protests, Iranian authorities have begun to pay attention to the negative consequences of instability in Syria. The prior belief about the strength of the Syrian regime has given way to concerns about the possibility Iran could lose an ally. In August 2011, Iranian officials made their first public statements distancing themselves against the growing repression against Syria's citizens and urged the regime there to recognize Syrians' legitimate demands. An appeal to take on reforms was also expressed by Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of the Lebanese Hezbollah, which is tied to the intelligence services of Iran and Syria.

**The Importance of Syria to Iran.** In recent decades, the governments of Iran and Syria formed a strategic alliance, overcoming divisions in the Middle East (especially Persian-Arab and Shia-Sunni hostilities). Syrian dictator President Hafez al-Assad was the first Arab leader to recognize the new regime in Iran after the 1979 revolution. Iran's theocratic government also recognized the Alawis as one of the strands of Shiism, although it was rejected by the most respected ayatollahs in Lebanon

and Iraq. In 1982, Iran and Syria signed the first package of military and economic agreements. These laid the foundations for a close alliance, initially intended to reduce the influence of Israel in Lebanon and to deter Iraq. This alliance survived the geopolitical changes after the Cold War, and in 2004, both countries signed an agreement on strategic cooperation and a pact of mutual military assistance in 2006. The loss of Soviet aid and the economic problems of Syria increased its dependence on Iran, which is one of the few foreign investors in the country.

The growing isolation of Syria among the Arab states has also been beneficial for Iran. In practical terms a common "Resistance Front" to Israel and the U.S. has been declared by Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas. In 2006, it gained the sympathy of the "Arab Street" after the Israel–Hezbollah conflict. However, Syria also continued its interference in Lebanese affairs, even after 2005 when Syria was forced to withdraw its military forces. In this same period, Syria also tolerated the transit of volunteers through its territory to fight U.S. forces in Iraq. This policy became an additional source of tension between Iran and Syria on the one side and Saudi Arabia and Jordan on the other. The main fear of the two Sunni monarchies was the consolidation of a "Shiia Crescent" from Lebanon to the Gulf and dominated by Iran. Iran also found beneficial Syria's rejection (period 2009-2011) of many gestures by the EU and U.S. to normalize relations.

President Bashar al-Assad's regime remains the single, formal ally of Iran in the Arab world, hence the special attention Iran has given to the Syrian crisis. According to the UN, during the more than six months of protests, nearly three thousand Syrians are estimated to have been killed. Three scenarios are possible: first, the Alawi minority and Baath Party may remain in power; two, a long civil war could erupt among the major religious and ethnic groups; and third, the Sunni majority could rise to power. Two of these three scenarios may result in a reversal of favourable regional trends for Iran—a trend that started in 2003 with the regime change in Iraq. An Alawi regime (probably without Assad) would allow Iran to maintain some influence in the Middle East; however, other scenarios do not guarantee this. There is a risk that Hezbollah and Hamas—cut off from the direct support of Syria and Iran—would be forced to reconcile with the main political forces in Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority. Sooner or later, the two radical movements could also seek new patrons, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt or Turkey. In this case, Iran might lose not only political influence but also the possibilities offered by its military allies in Syria, Lebanon and the Gaza Strip (in case of a conflict with Israel, these allies are key to any Iranian sabotage or retaliation missions).

**Iranian Internal Context.** Analogies between the situation in Syria and Iran are also of great importance to Iran's ruling elites. In the past, they have repeatedly expressed concern about the possibility of an Iranian "Velvet Revolution". For these reasons, Iranian leaders have systematically favoured increasing the political role of the IRGC and other security services. After manipulations of the voting in parliamentary elections, and especially after the 2009 presidential elections, the regime started to lose its democratic legitimacy and moved closer to a dictatorship model. Iranian elites are very concerned about the state of the national economy and growing unemployment among the younger generation. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's cabinet has failed to fix these issues and cannot cope with many social tensions. Iran's leaders were also surprised by the scale of the peaceful protests after the recent presidential election, although they succeeded in suppressing them. They remember the fact that three Iranian revolutions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have led to the systemic transformation of the country and changes in the elites. The Iranian opposition from the "Green Movement" is divided and weak and its leaders are under house arrest. This movement does not pose a threat to authorities as long as it is not questioning the basic rules of a theocratic regime. For the government of Iran, many more serious problems are tied to the possibility of an uncontrollable explosion of protests on a scale greater than the "Green Movement" and equally spontaneous to the Arab revolts.

**Conclusions.** Iran's various reactions and actions toward the Arab Spring are caused by its concerns over losing influence in the Middle East. Iranians prefer every scenario limiting opportunities for the West, but do not want to see increased influence from Saudi Arabia, Turkey or Egypt. In this context, the future of Iran's alliance with Syria is of particular importance. Iran has direct insight into the internal problems and the elite of the Alawi regime. It is possible that Iran also sees the real weaknesses of the Syrian regime and may be willing to make open contact with the Syrian opposition (when finds out if it is a real alternative to Assad). For the leaders of Iran, no less important is to draw their own conclusions from the Arab Spring so as to be helpful in channelling or pacifying the political and economic demands of Iranians.