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**Paper Title: The Arab Uprisings and its  
implications for the Middle Eastern  
regional subsystem: the case of Iran**

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# **The Arab Uprisings and its implications for the Middle Eastern regional subsystem: the case of Iran**

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During the last century international politics entered a planetary phase where the western mass-democracy is becoming a global social formation. The process of globalisation is not necessarily a pathway to peace, freedom and prosperity in a world of expanding population, limited resources and rising expectations. Commonality of objectives –as economic development in a highly technicised basis for example- could more probably lead to the intensification of interstate conflicts because of the competition for the same resources and same spaces than to consensus and cooperation among political units. The key issue of distribution and redistribution of global wealth will determine the nature of international relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

International relations have today attained a density that knows no analogies from the past. Nevertheless, interconnectedness of events on a global basis goes together with fragmentation. The focus of this paper will be on regional security interactions in the Middle East area. The political developments that occurred in Maghreb and the Middle East during the last eighteen months are of historical importance for the region. More particular I will try to locate the principal implications of the Arab Uprisings for the Iranian security relations. This paper begins with the presentation of the basic elements of the applied theoretical framework.

## Theoretical frame

A basic premise of this paper advocates that a regionalist approach to IR is indispensable in order to tackle international phenomena. When and how did the regional security dynamics become more prominent in international politics? We will set the beginning of decolonization as the starting point of this phase. From a world-historical perspective the process of decolonisation was one of the most fundamental phenomena in the history of international relations. Indeed, the demise of colonialism that gave rise to many independent states had a crucial impact on the morphology of the international system in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As early as 1977, the trends towards a “more regionalized world system” were identified by Hedley Bull<sup>1</sup>. In the “Third World zone” the ex-objects of world politics gradually transformed to independent, autonomous actors with more active involvement in their security affairs. After a few decades, the end of bipolarity has brought new sovereign states and new regional coalitions to the international system. As a result, the locus of conflict shifted from the global to the regional level. Globalization and fragmentation represent parallel and universal phenomena and the international system is therefore presented as a configuration of regional subsystems.

These initial considerations are important to understand that a regionalist approach to IR is more appropriate for the analysis of international phenomena of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a particular region. In other words, for a better understanding of international politics theoretical analysis needs to move towards regional differentiations. Assuming that “in the post-Cold War era the regional level stands more clearly on its own”<sup>2</sup>, the Regional Subsystems Theory provides a conceptual frame that enables one to explain developments in the Middle East region. This theoretical framework derives from concepts and ideas introduced in previous theoretical works –mainly those of Barry Buzan and Ole Waever who developed the Regional Security Complexes Theory. I have chosen to use the notion “subsystem” instead of “security complex”, ascribing a broader sense to it. My narrative’s focus will be on the military-political sector of international relations, since the aim of the

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<sup>1</sup> Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society, A Study of Order in World Politics*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995, p.225.

<sup>2</sup> Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers, The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p.4.

paper is to study the influence of the Arab Uprisings on the Middle Eastern conflict centers and especially on Iran.

The Regional Subsystems theory combines systemic analysis with other approaches, linking neorealism with classical realism. As mentioned above, it represents an attempt to understand international phenomena basing the analysis on the argument that the global international system consists of interconnected regional subsystems. This approach allows the resolving of theoretical and practical issues by distinguishing the domestic from the regional and the global level of analysis. Therefore, we can study the systemic pressures, the power relations at the regional level and the collective identity of each independent actor.

How do we define a regional subsystem? For Buzan and Waever a regional security complex -here termed *regional subsystem*- is a 'a set of units whose major processes of securitization, desecuritization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another'<sup>3</sup>. In other words, regional subsystems -based on geographical proximity- are consisted of independent state actors which have dense security interactions. Interaction embraces both conflict and cooperation, with the focus to be on conflict in this paper. In sum, two criteria are taken into account: security interaction and geographical continuity and it is also assumed that the state remains the main actor of the system. Moreover, a subsystem is a component unit within the international system and as Tibi mentions "every regional subsystem shows at the same time *a degree of autonomy* and *a degree of integration* in the global system"<sup>4</sup>. This implies that beyond the regional security dynamics, any subsystem could be open to external penetration by global powers.

We can identify four main features for each subsystem: a) *boundaries*, b) *ordering principle* c) *polarity* and d) *pattern of security interactions*. Since 'threats travel more easily over short distances than over long ones'<sup>5</sup> proximity still plays a crucial role for the security interaction among states. In order to form a subsystem, a group of states must lie in geographical continuity. Every subsystem maintains its borders that tend to

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<sup>3</sup> Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers, The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Bassam Tibi, *Conflict and War in the Middle East, From Interstate War to New Security*, MacMillan Press, 1998, p.33.

<sup>5</sup> Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers, The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p.45.

change through time. As a result, boundaries are not fixed and conflict is the central factor for its transformations. A second feature of a regional subsystem is its ordering principle that could be either anarchy or hierarchy. Anarchy -that presupposes at least two units who have the ability to conduct independent foreign policies- is the key feature of every regional subsystem after the end of the Cold war. Third, polarity is defined by the number of the regional poles of power in a particular region. It should be noted that a regional power can be considered as a middle or small power in the international system, thus the above criteria are valid only at the regional level of analysis. The fourth key characteristic is the pattern of security interaction and could take three basic forms. Variations of the pattern of amity and enmity among the members of a subsystem gives us different morphologies ranging from *conflict formation* through *security regime* to *security community*.

To conclude it should be highlighted that in every regional subsystem could occur three possible evolutions: a) *maintenance of the status quo*, b) *internal transformation*, that could be provoked by changes to polarity, to the patterns of security interaction or to the anarchic structure and c) *external transformation*, that signifies that outer boundary expands or contracts, changing the membership of the subsystem. Those are the principal variables of the Regional Subsystems theory in International Relations. The chosen theoretical framework is characterized by methodological pluralism –combining neorealist with neoclassical realist theoretical tools- and focuses on the military-political sector of international relations. At the same time it takes into account economic, cultural, environmental and societal dynamics that affect the nature and course of conflicts in the Middle East.

## **The Middle Eastern regional subsystem**

As mentioned above, a regionalist perspective could prove more helpful in terms of understanding the complexity of conflicts and power relations in the Middle East region. The Middle Eastern regional subsystem emerged in 1948 after the first Arab-Israeli war. It can be subscribed to the results of the decolonization process that

represents a major development during the short and bloody 20<sup>th</sup> century, according to Hobsbawm<sup>6</sup>.

The Arab-Israeli confrontation constitutes the most important feature of Middle Eastern security interactions after the Second World War. The wars of 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973 formed the basis of the balance of power in the periphery. Aside from the mentioned confrontation, an intra-Arab and intra-Muslim competition was taking place for power and influence. Weak states and non-state actors emerged and the increasing levels of insecurity rendered external penetration easier to occur. The Suez War in 1956 marked the substitution of the European powers of Great Britain and France by the USA as the dominant external power in the region. The Soviet-Russian influence -exerted on states like Syria- decreased significantly after the end of bipolarity. Henceforth, Washington's involvement -the presence of the US army in the Gulf, the military, diplomatic and economic support for its key regional ally, Israel, its policy against the emergence of a regional hegemon - is considered as a major factor for political developments in the region.

Delineating the Middle Eastern regional subsystem proved to be a really complex and difficult task. From our perspective, security interaction and geographical contiguity define the boundaries of regional subsystems. In general, the Middle Eastern subsystem is formed by two major conflictual cores: the Levant and the Gulf. The Israeli-Palestinian confrontation is at the centre of Near East security whereas in the Gulf, aside from Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, the United States has dominated the security interactions by their involvement in two wars the last decade. Although the Arab-Israeli conflict remains politically and symbolically central, it is no longer the epicenter of the region's violence after the US military presence and involvement in the subsystem.

According to our approach, the Middle Eastern regional subsystem includes all the states of the geographical zones of the Levant and the Gulf (Egypt, Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Yemen, the United Arab Emirates and Oman). Turkey and Afghanistan play a different significant role in the subsystem. Whereas Afghanistan is a field for regional and global power rivalries, Turkey is a pivotal state that possesses

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<sup>6</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes, A History of the World, 1914-1991*, Vintage Books, New York, 1996.

the required qualities of a regional power and exercises influence in the region, especially after the second half of the 1990's.

Concerning the ordering principle of the subsystem, the existence of autonomous, independent collective actors guarantees the preservation of the anarchic structure of the subsystem. Subsystemic polarity depends on the number of regional powers that exercise influence in a particular region. We identify five poles of power in the Middle East. Israel, Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia plus Turkey define polarity and the formation of alliances in the periphery. The characteristic of *multipolarity* indicates that there is no regional hegemon in the subsystem. In the classification of powers in the Middle East we can find middle-range powers, like Syria, small powers, like Jordan, and fragile states like Lebanon and post-2003 Iraq. Apart from the state actors, the (ύπαρξη) of grey zones of disorder and insecurity allows at non-state actors, like Hezbollah, to play a significant role in the balance of power.

As highlighted above, Israel and Iran constitute the most important and active regional powers in the subsystem of the Middle East today and they are the main antagonists in the struggle for power at this geographical zone. In the frame of this confrontation we can identify two alliances. On the one side, an axis has been formed under Iran's leadership, which includes the middle power of Syria –Iran's key Arab ally- and the non-state actors of Hezbollah in south Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. These are the main powers that counterbalance Israel in the subsystem. On the other side, Israel possesses the advantages of regional nuclear monopoly and a special strategic relationship with Washington against the enemy axis. It is important to mention that although the Arab states -including Saudi Arabia and Egypt- are diplomatically critical concerning Israel's policy for the Palestinian issue; they express at the same time fear vis-à-vis a powerful Iran. In this paper we will focus on the implications of the Arab Uprisings for the security relations of Iran with Israel, the Arab states, Turkey and the USA.

Middle East has been one of the most volatile subsystems since the end of the Second World War. As a consequence, its pattern of security interaction corresponds to a clear conflict formation. The patterns of friendship and enmity, in other words the formation and constitution of alliances can change rapidly and the levels of insecurity have been extremely high during the region's recent history. This pattern seems to be preserved and reinforced in the years to come due to the transformations provoked by the Arab Uprisings.

## **The Arab Uprisings**

Having established the theoretical framework of the paper, I will make a synopsis of the series of events which constitute the so-called Arab Uprisings. The protests and demonstrations that followed the self-immolation of a street vendor in the town of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia on December 2010 provoked significant turbulence to the wider Middle East area. The wave of uprisings moved from the Maghreb to the Levant and the Gulf, affecting a number of states, causing domestic structural changes to Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen and considerable internal disorder in Syria and Bahrain. It should be mentioned that a year and a half after its outbreak, the Arab revolts remain an on-going and open-ended transformational procedure.

Although the Arab Uprisings cannot be dealt as a single phenomenon, we will try to locate some common reasons behind the upheavals. A set of social, economic and political causes led to the outburst of revolts, with the majority of the participants to be unemployed youth people. A combination of economic crises after 2008 caused the dropping of living standards in Northern Africa and Middle East and spread insecurity and despair. The long lasting internal political problems, oppression from authoritarian regimes, corruption and lack of democracy together with the reaction to external involvement in the region's affairs have strengthened a popular demand for justice and dignity.

Beyond the common causes, the revolts followed different paths and progressed according to the individual characteristics of each country. These events will influence and modify the security framework of the Middle Eastern subsystem for the decades to come. Locating the distinct features of each revolt is of key importance. Syria is not Libya and Bahrain is not Tunisia. Reality on the ground imposes to avoid simplistic generalizations –many samples of which are located in the representation of the phenomenon by western media. A more cautious approach of the events should take into account the different political and economic environment, historical legacies, demography and cultural characteristics.

Since the focus of this paper is on Iran, we will concentrate on the evolutions that take place in actors that are crucial for Tehran's foreign policy: Egypt, Syria and Bahrain. The political developments in Egypt affect the majority of subsystemic



actors and external powers that have geopolitical interests in the region. The internal transformational procedure is still in progress and the domestic situation is far from being stabilized. Despite the overthrow of the long-standing authoritarian administration of Hosni Mubarak, important factors of the old regime remain strong and active –like the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces that was a pillar of the *ancien regime*. The forthcoming presidential elections will probably determine the domestic balance of forces and the future role of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Army and the radical Islamist groups. It is important to note that the group of people that took the initiative of the protests and articulated the demands of the revolution are not represented by a political formation at the second round of the elections of the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> of June.

Concerning the kingdom of Bahrain, it constitutes together with Yemen the only states in the Gulf area that were affected by the turbulence. The massive wave of manifestations provoked a military intervention from Saudi Arabia. The protestations, whose participants were mainly members of the Shia community of the state, were violently repressed. The reaction of the international community cannot be characterized as strong as in the case of Syria for example. Geopolitical interests of Western powers, mainly those of the USA, whose 5<sup>th</sup> fleet stations at the kingdom, led to the application of double standards. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's reaction at the Bahrain situation illustrates the dynamic of a counter-revolution that can occur, with the conservative Arab monarchies as the main protagonists. At the southern borders of Saudi Arabia, in the fragile state of Yemen, the upheavals combined with the Houthiste rebellion in the north and the request for autonomy at the south provoke high levels of instability and disorder.

In the case of the Syrian uprising, vital interests of the Islamic Republic are at stake. The most important ally of the Islamic Republic, the Allawite regime of Bashar al-Assad, faces a serious challenge from a resurrection that spread across the country. Although the Allawite administration have dealt with comparable upheavals in the past –with the example of the Homs uprising in 1982 and its estimated more than 10.000 victims-, it is the first time that it faces a critical situation. Until the end of January 2011, President Bashar Al-Assad was confident that the series of revolts would not affect the Syrian state. Syria's role as a supporter of Palestinian resistance, especially after the Israeli wars against Lebanon (2006) and Gaza (2008-2009), had increased Assad's popularity in the Arab streets. The protests that begun at the end of

January escalated to an uprising until March. The violent suppression from Assad's government has provoked thousands of victims. There is a risk that the protests would escalate to a confessional civil war with dramatic consequences for the population and the regional security.

## **Regional implications of the Middle East Uprisings for Iran**

This paper aims to contribute to research on the question of how will the Arab Uprisings affect the morphology of the Middle Eastern regional subsystem and what will be the implications for Iran. As it has been indicated at the first part, there can occur three types of evolution in a regional subsystem: a) *maintenance of the status quo*, b) *internal transformation*, and c) *external transformation*. The ongoing transformational procedure indicates that a change in the status quo is already in progress. In the frame of the Arab revolts a significant change to the domestic structure of a key actor is already taking place. Concerning the pattern of security interaction, the higher level of violence advocates the prolongation of the *conflict formation* pattern for the subsystem of the Middle East.

In relation to the aspect of an external transformation, the spillover of the revolutionary wave from Maghreb to the Levant and the Gulf can be perceived as a procedure of increasing density of security interaction between the North African and the Middle Eastern subsystems. Even though the prospect of a merge is not excluded in the long-term, we stress here that it is theoretically more accurate to distinct the two regions. Nevertheless, it is clear that interregional security interaction stands at a higher level and security issues of Maghreb and the Middle East will become more interconnected.

In the context of an internal subsystemic transformation what is more probable to change is the nature of alliances and the balance of power. As demonstrated above the regional security architecture of the Middle East is defined on the one hand by the rivalry between Iran and Israel and on the other hand by the Arab-Iranian competition. During the last decade, Iran and Israel have come to the forestage as the main protagonists of Middle Eastern international relations. At first we will examine the historical background and the prospects of Israel-Iran relations after the Arab upheavals.

## **Arab Uprisings and regional powers rivalry: Iran and Israel**

In the theoretical framework of Regional Subsystems theory, regional poles of power define polarity and shape the security architecture in a certain area. The qualification of more than one actor as regional powers preserves the anarchic character of a subsystem. After the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime and the consequent degradation of Iraq to the status of a weak state, it can be argued that five states meet the criteria to qualify as regional powers: Israel, Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

During the last decades, antagonism between Iran and Israel gained centrality in the security agenda. These powers have hegemonic ambitions and are the protagonists in their spheres of influence. The anti-Israeli axis, which links Iran with the middle-range power of Syria and the non-state actors of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, is a formation that sets obstacles to the Israeli supremacy in the Levant. At the same time, the Iran-led front represents a threat for the major Arab powers and Turkey, which also assert regional influence. The on-going procedure of the Arab revolts determines the transformation of this security constellation by changing the formation of alliances and by rendering the strategic interactions far more complex. At first, we will examine the particular effects that the possible outcomes of the Uprisings could have for the Iranian-Israeli relations.

What is the historical background of the Israel-Iran relations? The two states maintained close economic and political ties until the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Geopolitical interests, however, kept the channels between the two competitive powers open. After the end of the Cold War and the demise of Soviet military and political support from its former clients in the Middle East, significant changes occurred. The Soviet withdrawal and the consequent increased military involvement of the US in the Gulf lead to the substitution of the strategy of the "*security triangle*" (Iran-Iraq-Saudi Arabia) with that of "*dual containment*" versus Iran and Iraq. The antagonism between Tel-Aviv and Tehran became more prominent after the military intervention of

the United States and its allies. This war weakened Iraq militarily in relation to its neighbors, thus changing the distribution of power in the Gulf. The destruction of Saddam Hussein's army left Iran and Israel as unchallenged rivals for leadership and pre-eminence in the region, where the US emerge as an unchecked power. Henceforth, Israel regarded the possibility of an Iranian regional hegemony as a fundamental threat.

The main aspects of the Israel-Iran rivalry are apparent in a speech given by the Israeli Prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu in November 2009, where he identified three strategic threats for Israel's security: The first points that "a nuclear Iran" would threaten Israel's own existence. The second refers to the cross-border "missile and rocket attacks" from Islamist militant organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah. The third challenge to Israel's peace is, according to the Israeli PM, the attempt to deny Israel's right to self-defense –making direct reference to the UN Goldstone report on the Gaza war of 2008-2009. All the perceived threats against Tel Aviv were directly or indirectly linked with the Islamic Republic.

Until the burst of the upheavals at the end of 2010, the strategic environment could be characterized as favorable for the Israeli administration's foreign policy, despite the negative impact of the two wars against Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006 and against Hamas in Gaza in 2008-2009. Egypt's withdrawal from the forescene as a leading Arab actor in the confrontation with the Israelis -after the sign of the Camp David agreements in 1979- has left Israel the only *hegemon* in the Levant. Tel Aviv possesses the most powerful armed forces, it has a relatively wealthy economy and the number of terrorist acts against its population has decreased in comparison to the high level of violence observed some years ago. Concerning the Palestinian issue, the international community blamed both parts for the stalemate of the peace process. At the same time, Tel Aviv proceeded with the colonization of the West Bank and maintained its military dominance in the Palestinian territories. As a consequence it can be characterized as a status quo power.

Iran has been the only regional power to counterbalance Israel, through an anti-Israel alliance -the so-called "Resistance Front"- that connects the Islamic Republic with Syria, Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon and Hamas at the Palestinian territories. This alliance provides Tehran with the necessary means to put pressure on Israel by maintaining allied military forces at its borders. The outbreak of the revolts against the Bashar al-Assad regime could change the rules of the game. An internal structural

transformation in the only Arab ally of Iran would seriously rearrange the security order in the core of the Middle East and could leave Tehran with an even bigger loss. Syria plays a key role in the anti-Israel alliance and if the Allawite regime fails to deal with the domestic pressures, the future of the “Resistance Front” will become uncertain. Hezbollah would be weakened and the security situation at the Israeli-Lebanese borders would change significantly. On the other hand, Israel, who has made Iran the focus of its hostility, is watching closely the developments in Syria. The overthrow of the Assad regime would not necessarily be in favor of the Israeli foreign policy. The fear of an escalation to a civil war could increase instability in the region and the possibility of a more radical regime to take over is not excluded.

The wave of revolts could also lead to significant changes concerning the strategic issue of nuclearization in the area. The Islamic Republic’s nuclear program has become one of the most polarizing issues in world politics. A nuclear-armed Iran would erase Israel’s nuclear monopoly -its most distinct strategic asset- which has served for about four decades as a kind of ultimate national insurance policy. From this point of view, Tehran’s assumed effort to acquire nuclear arms could be interpreted as a counterbalancing action versus Israel. Remaining outside the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Israel is considered to be a de facto nuclear-weapons state with an advanced and sizeable arsenal. From an Israeli perspective, Iran’s determined and vigorous pursuit of a nuclear-weapons capability, together with the regime’s extreme hostility towards Israel, represents an existential threat.

The presence of more non conventional weapons in the subsystem will render stability far more difficult to achieve. The nuclear arms race, with the possible involvement of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, will bring new elements in the Middle East balance. How could the transformational procedure of the Arab Uprisings affect the nuclear question in the Middle East? First of all, in case there is a regime change in Syria and a new administration withdraws from the alliance with Iran, Tehran will find itself into a difficult position. The necessity of obtaining the nuclear weapon could be considered of higher importance by the Iranian administration. On the other hand the nuclear game will become more complex, in case Egypt returns as a major Arab power and asserts a leading role in the subsystem. Cairo is uncomfortable with the situation and has already taken

initiatives for establishing a nuclear weapons free zone (NWFZ) in the region. Having as competitors a nuclear Israel and a possible nuclear Iraq will push Egypt to pursuit the attainment of the atomic technology as well.

## **Arab Uprisings and the Arab-Iranian power competition**

‘Iranian-Arab relations have historically been characterised by competition, deep-rooted mutual suspicions and misgivings and expedient cooperation or at times only mutual accommodation’<sup>7</sup>. Territorial disputes, the Sunnite-Shiite antagonism, diverging patterns of alliance, ideological differences, the question of support to the Palestinian rights are some of the numerous factors that shape the context of competing power ambitions between the Islamic Republic and the major Arab states. The Arab Uprisings are of essential importance for the future of Iranian-Arab security relations.

Since the emergence of the Middle East as an autonomous regional subsystem in 1948, Iran competed with Arab powers (Saudi Arabia, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Syria before 1979) for regional supremacy in the Gulf and influence in the Arab and Islamic worlds. 1979 represents the landmark of a new era in Iranian foreign policy, even though the definition of vital geopolitical interests didn’t change much. Under the Shah, Iran was influenced by the Western global powers and opposed to the revolutionary regimes of the area. The plan for an Arab unity, promoted by Nasser’s Egypt represented a major danger for Tehran. After the impressive internal transformation that took place in the Islamic Revolution, the course of Middle East politics has changed.

The Islamic Republic doesn’t have a uniform appreciation of the Arab world. It varies according to the different regions and its geopolitical interests. After the Second Gulf War, the Gulf monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia, consider the “Iranian menace” as more dangerous than that of Israel. Even before 1979 -when the two states were both allies of the USA- there were signs of rivalry. Khomeini’s antimonarchy discourse and the support given by the Saud royal family to Iraq during the First Gulf War have deteriorated their relations. The collapse of the “security triangle” of the

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<sup>7</sup> Shireen Hunter, *Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 2010, p.185.

Gulf due to the external penetration of the subsystem by the USA changed dramatically the regional balance of powers. The security order could be challenged by possible domestic structural changes in the Arab monarchies, which found themselves in a defensive position. In case the conservative regimes are replaced by governments reflecting the sentiments of the Arab street toward Israel and US, the fundamental regional security architecture of the Gulf will be transformed.

After the collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq a favourable environment for the growth of Iranian influence in the subsystem has been created. Moreover, the presence of Shiite minorities enforces the unrest of certain Gulf States regarding Iran. Tehran has expressed its support for the uprisings -except from the case in Syria- and expects diplomatic gains from the Arab revolts. Undoubtedly, the Iranian regional *realpolitik* is favourable to the substitution of pro-USA regimes. The Islamic Republic administrators also hoped that the uprisings would turn the attention of the western powers away from the Iranian nuclear issue. Moreover, Iran's main Arab rival -Saudi Arabia- has been shaken by the takeover of Iraq by Shia political parties and the overthrow of its close ally Hosni Mubarak in 2011.

At the Gulf subregion, Iran supports the contestation of the Sunnite monarchy in Bahrain, where a Shia majority resides. On the other side, Saudi Arabia is the main supporter of the Syrian uprising. Riyadh's immediate answer to the Bahraini crisis was to send a counterinsurgency force, under the GCC flag to suppress the protestations in Manama. Furthermore, the Saudi administration aims at the reinforcement and consolidation of the GCC: the prospect of the enlargement of GCC with the integration of Jordan and Morocco represents the Saudi vision to create a monarchic solidarity, a Sunnite axis versus Iran, Iraq, Hezbollah and Syria. Riyadh may search for new partners (China, India, Russia,) in order to have more options in its strategy. But the special relationship between Washington and Riyadh remains a basic feature of the regional politics.

At the Levant subregion, the success of the Egyptian revolution resulted to the ousting of President Mubarak and spread more fear than hopes to the Israeli administration. During the Mubarak administration, Egypt was a key ally of the USA and supported Saudi Arabia in its rivalry with Iran. A possible renouncement of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty will reactivate the power pole of Egypt.



Although the Supreme Council has declared that Egypt "is committed to all regional and international obligations and treaties", a sign of foreign policy shift was observed when the Egyptian interim government, under the direction of General Mohamed Tantawi, has opened the Rafah border crossing with Gaza. Egypt's comeback will not only challenge Israel's hegemonic position in the Levant but also the leadership of Iran in the confrontation with Tel-Aviv. The success of the Egyptian uprising is therefore of regional and strategic significance – and could become a regional earthquake.

Undoubtedly, the role of the United States would be crucial and will determine the context of the security agenda. The future of Iraq, after the planned withdrawal of the US army, will give space for growing influence to Tehran and will increase the level of insecurity for the Gulf States. Last but not least, a possible evolution of the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, which is not considered feasible at the present time, would have major implications for all the members of the subsystem. The signature of a peace agreement and the foundation of an independent Palestinian state would be the preferred development for the Gulf Arab states. From their scope, a peace agreement will result the weakening of Iran's position in the Muslim world.

### **Arab Uprisings, the comeback of Turkey and Iran**

The Arab Uprisings offer strategic opportunities and constitute a major challenge for Turkey, who has a growing regional influence in the Middle East. After the AKP's rise to power, Ankara exerts soft power in the subsystem –declaring the doctrine of “zero conflicts” with the neighbour countries- under the guidance of the Secretary of Foreign Affairs Ahmed Davutoglu. It promoted its role as a mediator in the region in order to attain diplomatic and economic gains. The most characteristic example is the initiative of the tripartite project “Turkey-Iran-Brazil’ in May 2010 concerning the Iranian nuclear issue. During the last decade the economic and political relations of Turkey with the states of the Middle East region have developed considerably. Moreover, Turkey has the potential to become a role model for Middle Eastern countries in transition.

The multilevel and complicated diplomacy of Turkey however faces major difficulties after the outbreak of the revolts. Ankara is not immune to regional



instability that is spreading at the region, particularly in Syria. The Turkish policy versus the Assad regime changed after the developments on the ground. Erdogan hardened its tone and resulted to the degradation of Syrian-Turkish relations. With regard to its relations with Iran, the above mentioned shift of policy changes the regional context. The comeback of Turkey as a regional power is considered as a threat for Iran. Moreover, it seems that Ankara is tried to build closer ties to the Saudi regime, as its stance towards the Syrian revolt indicates. So, Tehran finds itself circled by the possible alliance between Turkey and the GCC states, under the leadership of Saudi Arabia.

Another field of competition among the two regional powers concerns their efforts to export their political models. Iran's ideology of revolutionary Islam -its universalist pretensions and antimonarchy discourse- threatens conservative Arab regimes, expresses defiance for the external Western powers and calls for unity for the Umma: positions that makes it appealing to some Arabs. But, in the context of the uprisings, the priorities of the revolutions were not primarily linked with Islamist –not even international or regional politics (imperialism, USA, Palestinian issue)- but with national and socio-economical issues (democratisation, poverty, unemployment, free elections, corruption). On the other side, the Turkish moderate Islamist model, that goes together with an economic success during the last years seems to be more charming for the Arab street. Turkey capitalised sympathy from the Arab societies by condemning publicly Israel's policy and showing a favourable attitude towards the transition in Egypt. In sum, the export of the Turkish model", which is competitive to the Iranian model of the Islamic revolution, seems to be more successful until now.

## **Conclusions**

This paper will conclude with the presentation of some remarks about the Arab Uprisings implications for the Islamic Republic:

- The political evolutions in Egypt -after the collapse of the Mubarak regime-, Syria and Bahrain constitute the major factors of the possible transformations in the region.

- The fall of Mubarak, the destabilization of the Sunnite monarchy in Bahrain, the possible uprising of the Arab people against their pro-USA monarchies (Jordan, Oman) are considered as diplomatic gains by Tehran in their struggle against the regional *hegemon* of the Levant: Israel. But a possible reactivation of the power pole of Egypt in the Middle Eastern subsystem will render the security interactions far more complex.

-A possible collapse of the Bashar al Assad regime and a change in the Syrian foreign policy could deprive Tehran from its key strategic ally. As a consequence, its capacity of intervention at the Levant -where Iran's non-state allies reside; Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Occupied Territories of Palestine- will be reduced.

-Tehran's profit from its diplomatic conduct was the raise of its prestige among the Shiites of Bahrain and of the region in general, as well as the degradation of the Riyadh's image at the Arab street after the intervention in Bahrain. On the other hand the reaction of the royal family of Bahrain the strengthening of its ties with Saudi Arabia. This can lead to the reinforcement of the Saudi position in the Gulf at the loss of Iran.

-The comeback of Turkey in the Middle East as a regional power implies opportunities and threats for Tehran's international relations. It seems that after the Arab Uprisings, the Iranian-Turkish relations have worsened. Ankara's approach to the Gulf Sunnite monarchies as well as the export of an alternative competitive Turkish Islamist moderate model to the Middle Eastern countries in transition, challenges the Iranian aspiration for regional supremacy.

-The Arab's uprisings constitute a warning for the Iranian regime to accelerate the reforms at the domestic level. Before the Arab Spring the Iranian administration faced the uprisings that followed Ahmadinejad's re-election in June 2009. It should be mentioned that the success of the Arab revolts could inspire the Iranian people to revolt and change their political structure.

