

ARAP BAHARI'NIN İRAN'IN ORTADOĞU POLİTİKASINA ETKİLERİ

ÖZ

Bu makale, Arap Baharı'nın İran'ın Ortadoğu politikası üzerindeki etkilerini incelemeyi amaçlamıştır. Arap Baharı'nın etkilerinin sonradan ortaya çıkan gelişmelere bağlı olarak zamanla değişmesi nedeniyle İran'ın bu dönemde tutarlı bir bölge politikası geliştiremediği iddia edilmektedir. Arap isyanlarının İran'ın önünde açacağı düşünülen fırsatlar gerçekleşmemiş, üstelik İran'ın bölgesel siyaseti için yeni tehditler ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu nedenle, Arap isyanlarının başlangıcında oldukça iyimser olan İranlı liderler zamanla daha ihtiyatlı bir yaklaşım geliştirmiş ve bölgesel gelişmeleri endişeyle izlemiştir. Yeni Cumhurbaşkanı Hasan Ruhani, dış politikada itidal ve uluslararası aktörler ile yapıcı etkileşimi öne çıkaran bir yaklaşımla Arap Baharı'nın İran'ın bölge siyaseti üzerindeki menfi tesirlerini etkisizleştirmeye çalışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Arap Baharı, Orta Doğu, İran, Ruhani, Şii Eksenli

تأثير الربيع العربي على سياسة ايران نحو الشرق الأوسط خلاصة

يهدف هذا المقال الى دراسة تأثير الربيع العربي على سياسة ايران نحو الشرق الأوسط. ان الربيع العربي الذي تغيرت تأثيراته بمرور الزمن بنتيجة التطورات التي ظهرت فيما بعد، قد حالت ايران دون تكوين سياسة متماسكة في المنطقة على حد ادعاء البعض. ولم تتحقق الفرص المفترض انها تفتتح امام ايران بسبب الثورات في بلدان الربيع العربي، بل ظهرت بعكس ذلك تهديدات جديدة امام السياسة الاقليمية لإيران. ولهذا السبب فان الزعماء الايرانيين الذين كانوا متفائلين جدا في بدايات ثورات البلدان العربية، قد طوّروا بمرور الزمن سياسة تنطوي على حذر اكثر وبدأوا بمتابعة التطورات الاقليمية بقلق. وقد حاول رئيس الجمهورية الجديد حسن روحاني ازالة التأثير السلبي لتأثير الربيع العربي على سياسة ايران الاقليمية عن طريق سلوك نهج الاعتدال في السياسة الخارجية وابرار التفاعل الايجابي مع اللاعبين الدوليين.

الكلمات الدالة : الربيع العربي، الشرق الأوسط، ايران، روحاني، المحور الايراني.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE ARAB SPRING FOR IRAN'S POLICY TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST

ABSTRACT

This article attempts to review effects of the Arab Spring on Iran's policy toward the Middle East. It argues that Iran could not have developed a consistent policy towards the region, because implications of the Arab Spring have varied in time in accordance with subsequent, emerging developments. The initial optimism of the Iranian leadership with regard to the Arab upheavals, gave way to prudent caution and rising anxiety as the expected opportunities brought by upheavals were overwhelmed by new challenges to Iran's regional strategy. With a new approach to foreign policy that highlighted moderation and constructive interaction with international actors, new Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has striven to neutralize the Arab Spring's adverse effects on the regional policy of Iran.

Keywords: Arab Spring, Middle East, Iran, Rouhani, Shiite Axis

Bayram SINKAYA*

Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Ankara, Turkey. Bayram Sinkaya is the author of *The Revolutionary Guards in Iranian Politics: Elites and Shifting Relations*, NY: Routledge (forthcoming). The author thanks Professor Mahmood Monshipouri, Nur Murphy and Pinar Arikan for their comments and contributions. An earlier draft of this article was presented at the V. Uludağ Uluslararası İlişkiler Konferansı, 11-12 December 2013, Bursa, Turkey.

Ortadoğu Etütleri

Volume 6, No 2,
January 2015, pp.54-78

Introduction

A few years ago, crowds of people from diverse backgrounds took to the streets, challenging ruling authoritarian Arab regimes at the time. Instantaneously dubbed the “Arab Spring” by many pundits, the Arab upheavals, triggered by the self-immolation of a young Tunisian street vendor named Mohammed Boazizi on December 17, 2010, profoundly altered regional geopolitics. Although it remained on the sidelines, Iran was also heavily impacted by the events that engulfed the Arab streets.

From the outset, the question of how politics and foreign policy in Iran was impacted by the Arab Spring has been in dispute. Some of the existing literature has focused on Iranian perceptions of the Arab upheavals, and/or underlined Iran’s inconsistent responses to developments in various Arab countries. Initially, Iran welcomed the upheavals as the “Islamic Awakening” that targeted pro-American regimes in the region, but denied the very democratic roots of the Arab upheavals, which was regarded as a threat to the arguably authoritarian regime in Iran and its only ally in the region: Syria.¹ Actually, as Hamid Ahmadi put it, “there was no agreement among the Iranians regarding the nature of the Arab Spring.”² Besides major disagreements between the ruling elite and mainstream opposition parties, there were also considerable differences within the ruling elite itself.³ Nevertheless, Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, instituted and represented the official stance of Iran toward the Arab revolts by referring to them as the ‘Islamic Awakening.’⁴

A bulk of the literature addressing Iran’s approach to the Arab Spring has been informed from the regional standpoint. Studies in this category mainly reviewed the strategic implications of the Arab Spring on regional politics and speculated on whether it has reinforced or undermined the regional power of Iran.⁵ While some analysts claimed that the Arab Spring as a whole improved

1 Ali Parchami, “The ‘Arab Spring’: the View from Tehran,” *Contemporary Politics*, Vol.8, No.1, March 2012, pp. 35-52; Ali Alfoneh, “Mixed Response in Iran: Middle Eastern Upheavals,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol.18, No.3, Summer 2011, pp. 35-39; Mahjoub Zweiri, “Revolutionary Iran and Arab Revolts: Observations on Iranian Foreign Policy and its Approaches,” Arab Center For Research & Policy Studies, Doha, September 2012.

2 Hamid Ahmadi, “Iran and the Arab Spring: Why Haven’t Iranians Followed the Arabs in Waging Revolution,” *Asian Politics & Policy*, Vol.5, No.3, 2013, p. 407.

3 For an analytical study deals with differences among the Iranian political elite at their approaches to the Arab Spring see, Amir Mohammad Haji-Yousefi, “Iran and the 2011 Arab Revolutions: Perceptions and Actions,” *Discourse – An Iranian Quarterly*, Vol.10, No 1-2, Winter-Spring 2012, pp. 23-60.

4 Payam Mohseni, “The Islamic Awakening: Iran’s Grand Narrative of Arab Uprisings,” Middle East Brief (Brandeis University, Crown Center for Middle East Studies), No.71, April 2013.

5 Dalia D. Kaya, Frederic Wehrey and M. Scott Doran, “Arab Spring, Persian Winter: Will Iran Emerge the Winner from the Arab Revolt”, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2011; Trita Parsi and Reza Marashi, “Arab Spring Seen from Tehran: The Geopolitical Contest for the Region’s Hearts and Minds”, *The Cairo*

Iran's regional standing,⁶ others argued that the same events weakened Iran's regional power.⁷ However, almost four years after the Arab Spring and the unintended consequences in the region, these earlier analyses have failed to best capture the dynamics unleashed—both at the regional level and internationally—by such upheavals. This is because although some of these developments served Iran's regional interests, others proved seemingly contradictory to their overall strategic interests.⁸ To answer the question of whether the Arab Spring worked for or against the Iranian regional interest, a much more nuanced and contextual analysis is needed.

This article attempts to analyze the implications of the Arab Spring for Iran's policy toward the Middle East. It argues that Iran could not have developed a consistent policy towards the region, because implications of the Arab Spring have varied in time in accordance with subsequent, emerging developments. In terms of its effects on Iran, the post-Arab Spring developments could be analyzed in three stages. In the first stage, which covers the first few months after the initial revolt in Tunisia in late December 2010, Iran was relatively content with the initial direction of the Arab Spring. Having been stuck in a "Cold War" in the Middle East for the last decade, Iran welcomed the "revolutionary movements" that challenged the rival "conservative" regimes in the region. There was a sense of complacency in the way the Iranian leadership viewed the Arab upheavals as a kind of 'blessing'. This was due in large part to the fact that, when viewed from the regional point of view, the revolts enhanced Iran's power vis-à-vis its adversaries.

Soon after, however, the initial optimism of the Iranian leadership gave way to prudent caution and rising anxiety as the expected opportunities brought by the Arab Spring were overwhelmed by new challenges to Iran's regional strategy. Contrary to its expectation to enlarge its sphere of influence and weaken its regional adversaries, Iran remained isolated and further threatened when the uprising targeted the Assad administration in Syria, a long-term ally of Iran.

With the election of Hassan Rouhani as the new president of Iran in June 2013, the third stage of Iran's policy toward the Middle East after the Arab Spring has begun. Until the election of Rouhani, Iran's foreign policy was

Review of Global Affairs, No. 2, Summer 2011, pp. 98-112; Naysan Rafati, "After the Arab Spring: Power Shift in the Middle East?: Iran and the Arab Spring," IDEAS reports - special reports, Kitchen, Nicholas (ed.) SR011. *LSE IDEAS*, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, May 2012.

⁶ For instance see, Suzanne Maloney, "Iran: The Bogyman", in *The Arab Awakening*, (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), pp. 258-267.

⁷ For instance see, Shahram Chubin, "Iran and the Arab Spring: Ascendancy Frustrated", Gulf Research Center (GRC) Paper, September 2012.

⁸ Henner Furtig, "Iran and the Arab Spring: Between Expectations and Disillusion," German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Working Papers, No.241, November 2013; Peter Jones, "Hopes and Disappointment: Iran and the Arab Spring," *Survival*, Vol 55, No.4, August-September 2013.

particularly dominated by Iranian neo-radicals in association with the former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the Supreme Leader Khamenei. This foreign policy was essentially based on confrontation with the United States and its regional allies. Weakened by the second stage of the Arab Spring, however, Iran was forced to reconsider its foreign policy. It was in this context that Rouhani emerged as a potential game-changer in Iranian foreign policy.⁹ With a new approach to foreign policy that highlighted moderation and constructive interaction with international actors, Rouhani has striven to neutralize the Arab Spring's adverse effects on the regional policy of Iran.

In a systematic attempt to analyze the impact of the Arab Spring on Iran and its policies toward the Middle East, this essay reviews Iran's responses to regional developments in three parts. First, it reviews Iranian responses to the Arab Spring in the optimistic early months. In the second section, the challenges raised by the post-Arab Spring Middle East and Iran's concerns with and responses to regional developments are examined. Finally, it reviews the Rouhani administration's foreign policy with an eye toward exploring its implications for the region.

First Stage: Arab Spring as a 'Blessing' for Iran

The Arab Spring took place at the height of polarization amongst the Middle Eastern states along the lines of their strategic considerations. A new "Cold War" had emerged between the regional countries shortly after the American intervention in Iraq in 2003.¹⁰ The demolition of the Baath regime in Iraq and the empowerment of the Shiite parties close to Tehran had raised concerns among the "conservative regimes" across the Arab world, led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Additionally, the popularity of Iran on the Arab street for its support for Hamas and Hizballah fighting against Israel – and partly for its evident anti-Americanism – further underpinned concerns of the conservative Arab regimes, who had warm relations with the United States and calm relations with Israel. They were afraid of the increasing regional power of Iran and of relying on the empowerment of Shiites and pro-Palestinian and anti-American sentiments within the Arab street. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's rise to power in Iran in June 2005, with an agenda aspiring to resuscitate a "revolutionary foreign policy" with an inflexible rhetoric, further aggravated the perceived threats on the side of conservative Arab leaders.

9 Mahmood Monshipouri and Manochehr Dorraj, "Iran's Foreign Policy: A Shifting Strategic Landscape," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 20, No.4, Winter 2013.

10 Morten Valbjørn and André Bank, "Signs of a New Arab Cold War: The 2006 Lebanon War and the Sunni-Shi'i Divide," *Middle East Report*, No. 242, Spring 2007, pp. 6-11; Morten Valbjørn & André Bank, "The New Arab Cold War: Rediscovering the Arab Dimension of Middle East Regional Politics," *Review of International Studies*, Vol.38, No.1, 2012, pp. 3-24.

In order to balance the emerging “Shiite axis” – including Syria, Hizballah, and the Shiite dominated Iraqi government – in alliance with Hamas, and to curb the increasing regional power of Iran, the conservative Arab states led by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan consolidated their security and political cooperation among themselves, which was labeled the Arab “moderation camp.”¹¹ Then, most of the regional powers opted for one of the two rival camps; the axis of moderation against the Shiite axis or the “resistance front.”¹² The fierce competition between the rival camps became clearly evident through the Israeli military attacks against Lebanon and Gaza in 2006 and 2008-2009, when prominent leaders of the conservative camp criticized Hizballah, Hamas and the Iranian leadership for provoking the clashes. The Tehran-Riyadh rivalry that lies at the center of regional polarization was dramatically exposed by the disclosure of Wikileaks documents, which hinted that King Abdullah asked his American interlocutors “to cut off head of snake”; implicating Iran.¹³ Geopolitical implications of the Arab Spring fanned the flames of mistrust and tension between the rival blocs.¹⁴

The polarization of the regional countries played a decisive role in their approaches to the upheavals within the Arab street that broke out in late 2010. The political elites have seen opportunities and challenges associated with the Arab Spring through that prism and have responded accordingly. As the tides of upheaval targeted conservative regimes of the moderation front, the Iranian leadership welcomed them as a ‘blessing’ for Iran and expressed its support for the protest movements.¹⁵ From the Iranian point of view, ostensibly “revolutionary” movements, particularly in Tunisia, Egypt, and Bahrain, were wel-

11 Kayhan Barzegar, “The Arab Revolutions and Iran’s Regional Policy,” *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly*, Vol.10, No 3-4, Summer-Fall 2012, pp.i-iv; Raed Omari, “The ‘Arab axis of moderation’ needs help,” *Al-Arabiya*, September 27 2013, available at <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2013/09/27/The-Arab-axis-of-moderation-needs-help.html> (accessed on May 15, 2014).

12 F. Gregory Gause III, “Saudi Arabia: Iraq, Iran, the Regional Power Balance, and the Sectarian Question,” *Strategic Insights*, Vol. 6, No.2, March 2007, pp. 1-8; Ayellet Yehiav, “The Anti-Iranian Front: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 11, No.1, March 2007, pp. 6-9.

13 “US Embassy Cables: Saudi King urges US Strike on Iran,” *The Guardian*, November 28, 2010, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/150519> (accessed on May 5, 2014). Alleged Iranian attempt to assassinate Saudi ambassador to Washington was another instance of Riyadh-Tehran confrontation. See, “Iranian plot to kill Saudi ambassador thwarted, U.S. officials say,” *CNN*, October 12, 2011, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/10/11/justice/iran-saudi-plot/> (accessed on May 5, 2014).

14 Mohammad Ayoub, “The Arab Spring: Its Geostrategic Significance,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 19, No.3, Fall 2012, pp. 84-97; Mohammad Ayoub, “The New Cold War in the Middle East,” *The National Interest*, 16 January 2013; Curtis Ryan, “The New Arab Cold War and Struggle for Syria,” *Middle East Report*, No. 242, Spring 2012.

15 “Regional Uprisings, Fruit of 1979 Revolution,” Official website of the Supreme Leader, April 3, 2011, <http://www.leader.ir/langs/en/index.php?p=contentShow&id=7938> (accessed on May 5, 2014).

comed events because they were expected to end pro-American conservative regimes in these countries.¹⁶

The Iranian elites anticipated that prospective regimes in those countries would be friendly to Iran because of either ideological or strategic reasons.¹⁷ Above all else, they appreciated some similarities between the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran and the current revolutionary upheavals across the Arab world in terms of their roots, organization and targets.¹⁸ Accordingly, the upheavals were inspired by the Iranian revolution to be anti-American, anti-Western, and anti-Zionist; and they were led by predominantly Islamic movements that aimed to build “religious democracies”.¹⁹ Ayatollah Khomeini asserted that economic and social factors, which are generally thought to be influential in the outburst of these mass protests, were only symptoms of a deep-seated rage felt across the Islamic world against the West.²⁰ Indeed, Islamist movements with a long history of opposition to the repressive regimes have given their support to the revolutionary social movements. Islamist parties like Al-Nahda in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt joined the opposition, asking for the fall of the regimes, gave enormous momentum to the revolutionary movements. Mosques were used effectively in the mobilization of the masses against ruling regimes. Slogans chanted by crowds at rallies and the demands of the people, according to the Iranian officials, were “more religious than political.”²¹

Iranian leaders also believed that the Arab revolutionary movements began a new chapter in the “perennial confrontation” between “Islamic revolutionary” Iran and the “imperialist world” led by the United States and Israel. This belief was further boosted by some reports implying that the US administration eyes Iran while making decisions on regional affairs.²² This perception was evident in Khomeini’s Norouz message in March 2012:

16 Actually, the social movements have done what Iran wished for years after the Islamic revolution of 1979. Then Iranian leadership had promoted and encouraged the Muslim masses to revolt against and depose pro-Western conservative regimes ruling over them. Despite the changing regional dynamics and the foreign policy perspectives of Iran throughout three decades after the revolution, the recent rise of regional polarization reactivated the Iranian ideological/revolutionary approach towards the Middle East. See, Parchami, “The ‘Arab Spring’: the view from Tehran,” p.36.

17 Kayhan Barzegar, “Arab Uprising and the Changing Geopolitics in the Middle East,” *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly*, Vol.10, No 1-2, Winter-Spring 2012, pp. i-xi.

18 For a comparative study of the Iranian revolution and the Egyptian “revolution” see, Farzad Poursaid, “A Comparative Study on Iran’s Islamic Revolution and Egypt’s Revolution,” *Discourse – An Iranian Quarterly*, Vol.10, No 1-2, Winter-Spring 2012, pp. 119-143. “What is happening now is the same experience the Iranian nation had 32 years ago...” Abbas Keshavarz, “Public demands in the Middle East are more religious than political,” *Islamic Awakening*, No.3, June 2012, p. 7.

19 Mohammad Hossein Jamshidi, “Unity, key to success of Islamic Awakening movement,” *Islamic Awakening*, No.3, June 2012, p. 8.

20 Parchami, “The ‘Arab Spring’: the View from Tehran,” 38.

21 Keshavarz, “Public demands in the Middle East are more religious than political,” 6-7.

22 David Sanger, “The Larger Game in the Middle East: Iran,” *The New York Times*, April 2, 2011.

The year that came to an end - the year 1390 - was one of the eventful years in the world, in the region and in our country. In general, one can see that these events ended in favor of the Iranian nation and they furthered the goals of our nation. Those in western countries who are nurturing malevolent goals in their minds about the Iranian nation, Iran and Iranians are faced with different problems. In the region, the nations that have been supported by the Islamic Republic have achieved great goals. Certain dictators were removed from power. The constitutions that were ratified in certain countries were based on Islam. The archenemy of the Islamic Ummah and the Iranian nation - namely the Zionist regime - was besieged.²³

As for strategic considerations, because the upheavals primarily targeted pro-American regimes that maintained amiable relations with Israel, Iran believed that the succeeding regimes in the revolutionary countries would most likely become anti-American. Iran considered the upheavals to be not only against the ruling regimes, but also against foreign powers that supported them, and also against the regional status quo that favored Israel.²⁴

In accordance with the assessment of the upheavals as anti-American, anti-Western, and predominantly Islamic, the Iranian leadership expected that the future regimes in revolutionary countries would be ideologically closer to Tehran. Therefore, the tide of upheavals would not only lessen the clout of the anti-Iranian front across the region, but also would eventually lead to the alteration of regional geopolitics in favor of Iran.²⁵ Additionally, it would provide new breathing space for Iran, having been under the pressure of heavy sanctions led by the United States and regional adversaries of Tehran.

Against this background, Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei branded the Arab upheavals as part of the wider "awakening" in the Islamic world. The wider Islamic awakening was seen as an indication of "Islamic Iran's" moral superiority against its rivals.²⁶ By branding the upheavals as an Islamic awakening, Khamenei underlined similarities between the Iranian revolution and the Arab revolutions. Thereby, he aimed to constitute a kind of solidarity between Iran and the revolutionary movements.²⁷ That sense of solidarity was

Robert Tait, "Is Iran still center of Middle East's 'Great Game,'" *RFE/RL*, April 13, 2011. See also Daniel Pletka and Frederick W. Kagan, "America vs. Iran: The Competition for the Future of Middle East," *AEI*, January 2014.

23 "Supreme Leader's Norouz message," Official website of the Supreme Leader, March 20 2012, available at http://english.khamenei.ir//index.php?option=com_content&task=view&cid=1611&Itemid=16 (accessed on May 5, 2014).

24 Parsi and Marashi, "Arab Spring seen from Tehran."

25 "Islamic Awakening will Give Birth to a New World Order in the Future," *Islamic Awakening* (website), May 21 2012.

26 Sadegh Zibakalam, "Syria's Uprising Spoils the Iranian victory of Islamic Awakening," *The Daily Star*, November 1, 2011.

27 The depiction of the Arab upheavals as the Islamic Awakening had also a domestic mission to con-

underpinned not only through similarities between the Iranian and Arab revolutions, but also through common enemies. According to Iranian leadership, perceived Islamic and anti-Western characteristics of the revolts made them open to attacks by enemies of Islam.

Nevertheless, Iran scarcely went beyond declaring political support for the so-called Islamic awakening. Probably the most concrete step taken by Iran in response to the Arab Spring was the establishment of the “World Assembly of Islamic Awakening.” Headed by Ali Akbar Velayati, former foreign minister and current advisor to Khamenei, the Assembly organized several conferences in Tehran, titled the Islamic Awakening, addressing miscellaneous social groups including religious scholars, intellectuals, university professors, youth, and women from various Islamic countries. The Assembly also started to publish a multilingual website and a monthly magazine named Islamic Awakening that ceased to appear after the tenth issue.²⁸

Second Stage: Currents Reversed Against Iran

Notwithstanding the initial optimism of the Iranian leadership towards the Arab Spring, the ensuing developments raised a number of challenges to Iran. First of all, it was not certain that an Islamic religious regime would replace the outgoing government. Unlike the narrative of the Iranian leadership, there was no common ideology, let alone Islamic identity, among the protestors to shape the future of the revolutionary countries.²⁹ On the other hand, even if Islamist movements come to power in the revolutionary countries, it might not necessarily serve Iranian interests.³⁰ This was partly because of the differences between parochial Islamic movements and the Iranian regime. Iran had few ties to the Islamic opposition movements in revolutionary countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria. Contrary to the Shiite characteristic of Iran, most of the local Islamic movements were predominantly Sunni. The rise of sectarian politics in the region further alienated local Sunni Islamic movements from Tehran. Moreover, some Salafi groups that appeared in due time were publicly against ‘Shiite Iran’.

solidate legitimacy of the Islamic Republic. Accordingly, the strife of wider masses in the Arab world to replace pro-Western conservative regimes with Islamic ones proved the rightfulness of the Islamic Republic regime and debased claims of opposition against the regime in Iran.

28 The publication of the Islamic Awakening was ceased after the 10th issue. For the published issues see, <http://islamicawakening-mag.net> (accessed on July 5, 2014).

29 Mohammad Frazmand, “Nations, not governments will make the new Middle East,” *Iranian Diplomacy*, March 27 2011, available at <http://irdiplomacy.com/en/page/10798/Nations%2C+not+governments%2C+will+make+the+new+Middle+East+.html> (accessed on May 5, 2014).

30 Ahmad Naghizadeh, “Iran and the New Middle East,” *Iranian Diplomacy*, April 4, 2011, available at <http://irdiplomacy.com/en/page/10786/Iran+and+the+New+Middle+East.html> (accessed on May 5, 2014).

The spillover effect of the Arab Spring also emerged as a challenge to authoritarian rule in Iran. The grassroots opposition movement in Iran, which emerged under the guise of the Green Movement immediately after the controversial presidential elections in 2009, might exploit the new regional mood to take discontented people into the streets again. Ironically, it was not only the ruling elites but also the figureheads of the opposition in Iran that welcomed the Arab revolts. According to the latter, however, the upheavals in the Arab street were far from being an Islamic awakening, as Khamenei put forward, but a predominantly democratic movement. The opposition underlined 'democratic' demands and multi-colored features of the protests against the dictatorial powers.³¹ What was troubling was the fact that these same opposition sources had been accusing the Iranian leadership of being dictatorial, as well. Therefore, the Arab revolts could precipitate similar waves, such as a democratic movement challenging the autocratic leadership in Iran. Considering the potential challenges raised by the Iranian opposition that could exploit the region-wide protests, Iran prevented rallies called by the opposition leaders, ostensibly for consolidation with the Egyptian people. Moreover, Mir Hussain Mousavi and Mahdi Karrubi, respected leaders of the opposition that survived the suppression of the Green Movement, were put under house arrest. Thus, the consequences of the Arab Spring have led to the increased securitization of domestic politics in Iran.

On the other hand, the Iranian leadership was also concerned with probable counter-revolutionary activities by opponents of the so-called Islamic awakening. To the Iranians, the United States and its regional allies who were afraid of the Islamic awakening would attempt to control the course of events and to derail the "revolutions."³² In this respect, Supreme Leader Khamenei warned in public sermons that 'arrogant powers are repositioning themselves as if they have been supporting popular movements' in order to overtake the revolutionary movements.³³

From mid-March 2011 onward, the course of developments shattered the initial Iranian optimism toward the Arab Spring and turned it into a formidable challenge for Iran. The first blow to the Iranian optimism came in Bahrain.³⁴ The spread of the tide of revolts into Bahrain on February 14, 2011 had further excited the Iranian leadership. There were primarily two reasons

31 For instance see Sadeq Zibalam, "ME Movements are not anti-Western in Nature," *Iranian Diplomacy*, March 27 2011, available at <http://irdiplomacy.com/en/page/10802/ME+Movements+are+not+Anti-West+in+Nature.html> (accessed on May 5, 2014).

32 Ghasem Torabi, "Arab Revolutions and Iran's Security," *Discourse – An Iranian Quarterly*, Vol.10, No 1-2 Winter-Spring 2012, pp. 97-117; Keshavarz, "Public demands in the Middle East are more religious than political," p. 6.

33 Parchami, "The 'Arab Spring': the view from Tehran," p. 37.

34 Mehdi Khallaji, "Iran's Policy Confusion about Bahrain," *WINEP Policy Watch*, No. 1823, June 27, 2011.

for the Iranian excitement. First, Bahrain has been home to the 5th Fleet of the US Navy. A successful and supposedly anti-American revolution in Bahrain would create troubles for American military interests in the Persian Gulf, and would prevent further American access to Bahrain. The second reason was the demographic structure of that island country. Almost 70 percent of the Bahraini population is Shiite. Therefore, a successful and democratic revolution in that country would most likely bring Shiites to power. A prospective Shiite government so close to Saudi Arabia, a nation that apparently leads the anti-Iran/Shiite front, would be a strategic gain for Iran. Furthermore, a successful revolution in Bahrain might precipitate similar revolts in the conservative Gulf countries that could profoundly change the geopolitical structure in the Middle East in favor of Iran.

Considering the challenges of a “Shiite revolt” in Bahrain and upon the invitation of King Hamad bin Issa al-Khalifa, a GCC force led by Saudi troops intervened in the island country on March 14, 2011. The intervention of Saudi Arabia in Bahrain, to quell ‘peaceful’ protests against al-Khalifa rule, evidently displayed the Saudi resolve to impede and contain any opposition movement threatening Saudi interests.³⁵ It sparked strong criticisms in Iranian media outlets and Iranian officials brought the issue to UN forums, albeit without much success in the way of meeting their goals and expectations. Eventually, the Iranians who were initially heartened by the prospects for the protests in Bahrain were disappointed and helpless against the Saudi intervention.³⁶

Another blow to the optimism of Iran came with the military intervention of NATO in Libya on March 19, 2011 to save the opposition forces from reprisal by Muammar Qaddafi. The NATO intervention in Libya not only saved the opposition, but also secured close relations with the prospective government in Tripoli and the West. Thereby the West, in view of the Iranian leadership, “hijacked” the revolutionary movement of the Libyan people.³⁷

The foremost challenge raised by the Arab Spring for Iran was the spread of a revolutionary wave into Syria on March 16, 2011. The ruling Baath regime in Syria was a long-time and only ally of Iran among the Arab states. In contrast to the low profile and reactive policy of Tehran towards the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and the uprising in Bahrain, it was resolved to prevent any kind of revolutionary change in Syria. Iran did not lose time in depicting the growing opposition against the Assad administration and the anti-gov-

35 Helene Cooper and Mark Landler, “Interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran Collide, With the U.S. in the Middle”, *The New York Times*, March 17, 2011.

36 Simon Henderson, “GCC Summit will Gauge Regional Confidence in U.S. Policy,” *WINEP Policy Watch*, No. 2180, December 9, 2013.

37 “Iranian Diplomat Cautions about West’s Plot to Derail Libyan Revolution,” *Fars News Agency*, January 3, 2012.

ernment rallies that rapidly turned into violent clashes between the security forces and the protestors as plots of the enemies of the Islamic Awakening. To the Iranian leadership, which regards being against Israel and the American hegemony as the most important characteristic of the Islamic awakening, any rebellion against a regime that was part of the resistance front was illegitimate.³⁸ As the Assad administration was a part of the “resistance front” against the “Israeli occupation” and the American hegemony, it was unacceptable to the Iranian leadership that the Syrian people would rise against it.

Recalling the previous American attempts to dissociate Syria from its alliance with Iran,³⁹ Tehran viewed the Syrian revolt not only as a challenge for the Assad administration, but also as an attack against the interests of Iran. The likeliness of the deposition of the Assad administration in Syria, which was considered an indispensable part of the ‘resistance front’ bridging Iran to Lebanon, would deal a heavy blow to the strategic interests of Iran in the Levant. Then, Iran would not only lose its critical ally, but also become vulnerable against future incursions of its enemies. Western and Saudi support for the Syrian opposition have also “confirmed” the Iranian resolve to stand with the Assad administration.⁴⁰

Iran’s strong support for the Assad administration to fight a “peaceful opposition movement demanding political rights” has furbished the Iranian image as an expansionist and sectarian power. Since the rise of the polarization of the Middle East between the so-called Shiite axis and the moderate camp in mid-2000s, its adversaries portrayed Iran as a sectarian power aspiring to build a “Shiite axis” by exploiting the Shiite peoples across the region. Iran was also depicted as a destabilizing force that mobilizes insurgents or Shiites against their own governments.⁴¹ Iran’s support extended to mostly “Shiite” Bahraini opposition against the ruling “Sunni” al-Khalifa dynasty and to the predominantly “Alawite” – an offshoot of Shia – Assad administration against

38 Sadegh Zibakalam, “Syria’s Uprising Spoils the Iranian victory of Islamic Awakening,” *The Daily Star*, November 1, 2011.

39 Mohammad Tabaar, “Analysis: Breaking the Syria-Iran Alliance,” *BBC News*, August 26, 2006, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5263800.stm (accessed on July 5, 2014); Tony Badran, “The Syria-Iran Alliance,” *In Focus Quarterly*, Vol.3, No.1 (Spring 2009), available at <http://www.jewish-policycenter.org/825/the-syria-iran-alliance> (accessed on July 5, 2014).

40 Torabi, “Arab Revolutions and Iran’s Security,” 97-117. See also Bayram Sinkaya, “İran-Suriye İlişkileri ve Suriye’de Halk İsyanı” (Iran-Syria Relations and Popular Unrest in Syria), *Ortadoğu Analiz*, Vol.3, No.33 (September 2011), available at http://www.orsam.org.tr/tr/trUploads/Yazilar/Dosyalar/2011926_5.pdf; Bayram Sinkaya, “Arab Baharı Sürecinde İran’ın Suriye Politikası,” *SETA Analiz*, No.53, April 2012, available at <http://file.setav.org/Files/Pdf/arap-bahari-surecinde-iran'in-suriye-politikasi.pdf>.

41 Mohammad Ali Mohtadi, “Spreading Iranophobia, Propagating Anti-Shiism,” *Iranian Diplomacy*, November 5, 2012, available at <http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/en/page/1908734/Spreading+Iranophobia%2C+Propagating+Anti-Shi%E2%80%99ism.html> (accessed on May 5, 2014). Zweiri, “Revolutionary Iran and Arab Revolts: Observations on Iranian Foreign Policy and its Approaches,” pp. 5-7.

mainly Sunni opposition was used by its adversaries to paint the Iranian image as biased, sectarian, expansionist, with a destabilizing government. Indeed, the growing sectarian conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain, and Lebanon, etc. has boosted that image, which has smeared the Iranian claim for leadership for causes of the whole Muslim world. Subsequently, the popularity of Iran in the Arab street had deeply reversed by late 2011.⁴² Former President Ahmadinejad, once very popular in the Arab street for his support to the “resistance” against Israel, was faced with severe criticism from the Egyptians at his visit to al-Azhar in Cairo, in February 2013, for sectarian and pro-Assad policies of his government.

As the course of events reversed against its interests, Iran has failed to turn regional developments to its advantage and reap dividends of the Arab Spring. Tehran has pursued a low profile and reactive policy towards the region.⁴³ Actually, Tehran had few instruments and a limited capacity to influence the course of events throughout the Arab Spring. The factional bickering inside the country, worsening economic conditions, and rising international pressure to isolate Iran heavily curbed its capacity to deal with regional developments.

Although Iranian officials had assessed the Arab Spring as a new opportunity to confront American policies⁴⁴ and the “moderate camp” in the Middle East, Iran could not have secured the friendship of new governments in Tunis, Cairo, or Tripoli. The successors of the outgoing regimes, instead of joining the resistance front, preferred to be distant from Iran either because of intimidation from Western or regional powers, or because of their own rational calculations. Any kind of close relationship with Iran had few to render to the “revolutionary” governments with the exception of bringing a high risk of antagonizing major Western and regional powers. Instead, those governments in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya have approached “the Turkish model” and embarked on improving their relations with the Western countries and the moderate camp.⁴⁵

Tehran welcomed the establishment of new governments in countries in transition – Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, however, its relations with

42 “Poll: Sharp Drop in Iran’s Popularity in Arab World”, *Haaretz*, 27 July 2011; David A. Patten, “Zogby Poll: ‘Shocking’ Drop in Iran’s Popularity in Arab World,” *Newsmax*, July 26, 2011, available at <http://www.newsmax.com/Newsfront/zogby-obama-iran-popularity/2011/07/26/id/404933/> (accessed on May 30, 2014). See also Shibley Telhami, “Arab Perspectives on Iran’s Role in a Changing Middle East”, Wilson Center, *The Changing Security Architecture in the Middle East*, Issue 2, 2013.

43 Farhad Atai, “Iran within the Political Dynamics of the Middle East,” *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, Vol.2, No.4, Winter 2012, pp. 53-54; Maloney, “Iran: The Bogeyman”, p. 262.

44 Plenary talk given by Iran’s Deputy Foreign Minister Ali Fathollahi at the Iranian Embassy in Ankara, October 7, 2011.

45 Mohyeddin Sajedi, “Critical Review of Islamism in Arab States,” *Press TV*, May 14, 2012, available at <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/05/14/241213/critical-approach-arab-islamists/> (accessed on May 30, 2014).

those countries hardly realized expectations of the Iranian government. Aside from the expression of goodwill, Iran's relations with those countries remained limited to the exchange of some ministerial and parliamentary delegations. Among the revolutionary countries, Iran paid special importance to developing its relations with Egypt.⁴⁶ Immediately after the overthrow of the Mubarak regime, Egyptian officials allowed two Iranian war-ships to pass through the Suez Channel to reach the Mediterranean Sea. Moreover, the two countries declared their intention to establish diplomatic relations.

Nevertheless there was no recorded high-level visit between the two countries until Egyptian President Mohammad Morsi's visit to Tehran in August 2012 for the summit of the Non-Aligned Movement. In return, Iranian President Ahmadinejad visited Cairo in February 2013 to attend the summit of Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Mutual visits between Iran and Egypt led to the signing of a number of agreements, including the promotion of Iranian tourists to visit Egypt. The Morsi government, however, faced opposition from Salafi groups and remnants of the Mobarak regime inside the country and criticism from some Gulf countries in his attempt to improve Tehran-Cairo relations. When President Morsi was ousted by a coup d'état in July 2013, Egypt and Iran still had some steps to normalize diplomatic ties and to exchange ambassadors.

In the meantime, after a decade of unprecedented rapprochement, Iran's relations with Turkey started to deteriorate when they adopted opposite approaches to developments in Syria.⁴⁷ While the Turkish government has hosted and supported the opposition, Iran vigorously supported the Assad administration. Moreover, in addition to close cooperation between Turkey and the United States vis-à-vis regional developments, the Turkish permission for the deployment of American radars in Malatya in 2011 within the framework of the NATO missile defense shield program exposed the realignment between Ankara and Washington. The ensuing encounter between Turkey and Iran led to mutual criticisms of their regional policies. Hence, Turkish-Iranian relations apparently started to decline soon after the Arab Spring.

The commitment of Iran to keep Assad in power not only alienated Turkey, but also worsened its relations with Hamas. Iran cut its financial support to Hamas because it refused to support Assad. In response to increasing pressure both from pro-Assad forces and from his opponents, Khaled Meshal, head of Hamas's political bureau, left his headquarter in Damascus for Doha,

46 "Challenges in Iran-Egypt Relations," *Iranian Diplomacy*, September 30, 2011, available at <http://irdiplomacy.ir/en/page/16631/Challenges+in+IranEgypt+Relations.html> (accessed on May 30, 2014).

47 Bayram Sinkaya, "The 'Fall' of Turkey-Iran relations," *ORSAM Foreign Policy Analysis*, September 22, 2011, available at <http://www.orsam.org.tr/en/showArticle.aspx?ID=816> (accessed on June 30, 2014).

in January 2012. This movement was regarded as Hamas's split with the 'resistance front.' Thus Iran lost one of its few allies in the region.⁴⁸

Consequently, by the time Hassan Rouhani came to power in mid-2013, Iran remained weakened and isolated in the region. Moreover, the Iranian image in the Arab street was further tarnished because of its staunch support for the Assad regime, which was presented/viewed as a sectarian Shiite consolidation against a revolutionary, popular, democratic movement. Iran could not have established effective and sustainable relations with the "revolutionary governments" in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. The late flirtation between Tehran and Cairo was reversed by the coup d'état in Egypt. Besides its failure to secure friendship of any of the "revolutionary" governments, its few allies in the region have broken away. While Hamas changed its allegiance from Tehran to Doha, Syria was dragged into a bloody civil war.

Third Stage: Rouhani and New Horizons in Foreign Policy

Hassan Rouhani was elected as the new president of Iran to replace Ahmadinejad in June 2013. Rouhani's approach to foreign policy has been profoundly different from his predecessor, who strived to resuscitate revolutionary foreign policy and highlighted confrontation with, and resistance against, the West.⁴⁹ Instead, Rouhani has been committed to a moderate approach regarding foreign policy based on rationality and prudence. He has promised "moderation" in foreign policy and "constructive interaction" with regional and international actors.⁵⁰ In addition to his political career as a close confidant of the well-known pragmatist leader Hashemi Rafsanjani, and his selection of a foreign policy team consisted of internationally respected diplomats; Rouhani's emphasis on moderation has marked the ascension of 'realism' and pragmatism in Iranian foreign policy.⁵¹

Indeed, Rouhani exposed what he does understand in his moderation in foreign policy. According to him, moderation means establishing a balance between realism and the pursuit of the ideals of the Islamic Republic; to discard any extreme approach in relations with other states; effective and constructive understanding and interaction with the outside world; and to focus on mutual confidence building with neighbors and regional and international ac-

48 Fares Akram, "Hamas Leader Abandons Longtime Base in Damascus," *The New York Times*, January 27 2012; Ali Jannati, "Doha's Attempts to Distance Hamas from Tehran," *Iranian Diplomacy*, October 22, 2012; Girogio Cafiero, "Hamas in the New Middle East," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, November 15, 2012; Nicholas Blanford, "Iran's 'axis of resistance' losses its Palestinian arm to Syrian war," *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 9, 2013.

49 Monshipouri and Manochehr Dorraj, "Iran's Foreign Policy: A Shifting Strategic Landscape."

50 Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, "Rouhani's post-populist foreign policy," *Asia Times*, August 2, 2013.

51 Kayhan Barzegar, "Iran-Saudi Relations Under Rouhani," *Al-Monitor*, July 19, 2013, available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/iran-saudi-relations-under-rouhani.html> (accessed on June 30, 2014).

tors. One of the remarkable features of moderate foreign policy as emphasized by President Rouhani was to “try to orient foreign policy towards economic development.”⁵² By restoring and improving Tehran’s relations with leading international and regional actors with a moderate foreign policy, Rouhani is projected to improve Iran’s standing in international and regional affairs, and to increase its maneuvering capability in dealing with foreign policy issues.⁵³

Rouhani has given priority to the diplomatic solution of controversy over the Iranian nuclear program. Although he has been denouncing so-called Western attempts to halt Iran’s nuclear program and criticizing sanctions in most of his speeches, Rouhani advocated further transparency with regard to the nuclear issue in order to alleviate concerns of Western and regional powers. Thereby, he hoped to waive heavy sanctions that had begun to cripple the Iranian economy and to break the isolation of his country in the last couple of years.⁵⁴ Thus, Rouhani invested much in the political solution of the nuclear issue. The Joint Action Plan is extended twice in 2014 to provide a solid ground for future negotiations between the parties.

Having a “centrist” position in the Iranian political landscape and having served as representative of Ayatollah Khamenei in the Supreme National Security Council for over twenty years, President Rouhani has enough credit to reach a compromise with P5+1 countries on the nuclear issue. His “moderate” discourse has also been welcomed by the international community, which served as an intervening factor in finding a diplomatic solution to the problem.⁵⁵ Eventually, the parties reached a 6-month preliminary agreement that would give further chances for a definite solution in November 2013.⁵⁶ In accordance with the Geneva Agreement, P5+1 countries have accepted the easing of limitations on Iranian oil revenues and the removal of sanctions on Iran’s petro-chemical exports in return for Iran’s promise to decrease its stockpile of enriched uranium, halt enrichment activities temporarily, and cease building a heavy-water reactor in Arak. The parties agreed to put the Joint Action Plan that was drawn in parallel to the Geneva Agreement into force on January 20, 2014.

52 “Dr. Rouhani’s Speech in a Gathering Convened by Asia Society and the Council on Foreign Relations in New York,” Presidency of the IRI News Service,” Official Website of the Presidency of the Islamic Republic of Iran, September 27, 2013, <http://president.ir/en/71857/printable> (accessed on May 10, 2014).

53 Mohammad Reza Kiani, “Iran’s Foreign Policy Under Rouhani,” Institute for Middle East Strategic Studies, September 7, 2013, available at <http://en.cmess.ir/default.aspx?tabid=98&ArticleId=567> (accessed on May 10, 2014).

54 “President in his First Press Conference: Sanctions Aimed at Pressuring Iranian People,” Official Website of the Presidency of the Islamic Republic of Iran, August 6, 2013, <http://president.ir/en/70454/printable> (accessed on May 10, 2014).

55 Reza Kiani, “Iran’s Foreign Policy Under Rouhani,” September 7, 2013.

56 “Iran seeks to reverse referral process of Iran’s Nuclear issue to Security Council,” *Iranian Diplomacy*, January 18, 2014.

Corresponding to the initial breakthrough with the West provided by the Geneva Agreement, Rouhani has aimed to restore Iran's relations with the European countries, which had worsened in the previous decade as marked by the EU's increasingly heavy sanctions against Tehran. Furthermore, Iran's diplomatic relations with Britain, a major player in European politics, had nearly ceased after mobs stormed the British embassy in November 2011 to protest British policies. Unlike his predecessor, that turned the direction of Iran's foreign policy towards the "East",⁵⁷ Rouhani has had particular interest in improving relations with European countries. Immediately after the election of Rouhani, former British Secretary of State Jack Straw expressed his interest in attending the new president's inauguration ceremony on August 3, 2013. Although the hardliners in Tehran discouraged the presence of Straw, British Prime Minister David Cameron wrote a letter to Rouhani and "called for improved ties with Iran." Soon after his inauguration, Iran and the United Kingdom took steps to normalize diplomatic relations. Eventually a British parliament delegation visited Tehran in January 2014, and soon after a visit was paid by an eight-member delegation from the European Parliament.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, after a decade of nonattendance by Iranian leaders, President Rouhani joined the World Forum in Davos, Switzerland in January 2014 and invited international companies to invest in Iran.⁵⁹

Rouhani's Approach toward the Middle East

Although President Rouhani put a diplomatic solution of the nuclear issue as his first priority, his foreign policy agenda that call for "constructive interaction" has implicated a revision of Iran's approach to the Middle East as well. Until the time Rouhani came to power, as outlined in the preceding pages, Iran had not only failed to materialize either of the expected benefits from the Arab Spring, but also further antagonized the Gulf countries led by Saudi Arabia. Additionally, Iran's staunch support for Assad, who had been fighting opposition violently and dragging his country into civil war, has further alienated the Arab streets from Tehran. Additionally, the regional policies of Iran as practiced for years were partly responsible for the deterioration of its relations with the West. Therefore, with his credentials for being rationalist and moderate, Rouhani was expected to "pursue an accommodative foreign policy" in the Middle East.⁶⁰

57 Sanam Vakil, "Iran: Balancing East against West," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol.29, No.4, 2006, pp. 51-65; Nasser Saghefi-Ameri, "Iran and 'Look to the East' Policy," *Center for Strategic Research*, September 2006, available at http://www.csr.ir/PDF/Issues102/PeriodicalIssues_1.pdf (accessed on May 10, 2014).

58 "British Lawmakers Visit Iran Ahead of Talks," *The New York Times*, January 7, 2014.

59 Reza Kiani, "Iran's Foreign Policy Under Rouhani," September 7, 2013.

60 Barzegar, 'Iran-Saudi Relations Under Rouhani,' July 19, 2013; Afrasiabi, "Rouhani's post-populist foreign policy," August 2, 2013.

As to the Middle East, Iran's reconciliation with Saudi Arabia was critical, because the rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh has further complicated a number of regional issues. Iran and Saudi Arabia confronted each other in regional hot spots such as Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. While Iran has been accusing Saudi Arabia of fomenting unrest in Iraq and Syria by supporting "terrorists" and blocking people's legitimate demands in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia has charged Iran with deliberately destabilizing Bahrain, Yemen, and Lebanon.⁶¹ Hence, since the beginning of his election campaign, Rouhani has given positive signals toward the Saudi Kingdom.⁶²

Despite its "official" welcoming of the election of Rouhani and the Geneva deal,⁶³ the Saudi officials did not believe in a change in Iranian foreign policy regarding its geopolitical interests, arguably in search of regional hegemony relying on the Shiite demographic structure. The maintenance of Iranian approaches to crisis points as in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon has led to the continuation of the Saudi sense of a threat from Iran. The preliminary agreement between Iran and P5+1 and the ensuing perception of "conciliation" between Iran and the United States has further distressed the Saudi concerns with potential geostrategic implications of any rapprochement between Washington and Tehran.⁶⁴

Indeed, Rouhani's "moderate" foreign policy approach has not reached the Syrian issue. It is partly because of the very complex nature of the conflict in Syria, and partly because the existence or collapse of the Assad administration in Syria has been regarded by Iran as a matter of national security. Thereby, the command of relations with Syria has been mostly surrendered to the security elites and the Revolutionary Guards. Reiterating previous Iranian statements on Syria, Rouhani has denounced civil war, the presence of 'terrorists' in the country and foreign intervention.⁶⁵ He has argued that the only solution to ending the crisis in Syria lies in political means and talks among all Syrian groups and the government. Nonetheless, Iran's resolution to support the Assad administration has not changed.

Nevertheless, soon after achieving the preliminary agreement on the nuclear case, the Rouhani government has turned its attention to the Gulf. In

61 Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran Takes Charm Offensive to the Persian Gulf," *The New York Times*, December 4, 2013.

62 "Iran-Saudi Détente, Requisite of Regional Peace," *Iran Review*, January 14, 2014, available at <http://www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/Iran-Saudi-Détente-Requisite-of-Regional-Peace.htm> (accessed on May 10, 2014).

63 "Saudi Arabia welcomes Geneva Agreement on Iranian nuclear program as first step," Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Washington DC, November 25, 2013, http://www.saudiembassy.net/latest_news/news11251302.aspx (accessed on March 1, 2014).

64 Barzegar, 'Iran-Saudi Relations Under Rouhani.'

65 "President in his First Press Conference: Sanctions Aimed at Pressuring Iranian People," Official Website of the Presidency of the Islamic Republic of Iran, August 6, 2013.

the first week of December, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif paid official visits to Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and UAE to mend ties with the Persian Gulf countries. However, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia⁶⁶ were missed in this tour of the region. Although Zarif confirmed Iran's interest in reconciliation with Saudi Arabia and revealed his intention to visit Riyadh, Saudi officials reportedly declined the offer by arguing, "the time was not ripe for such a rapprochement."⁶⁷ Six months later, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal extended a public invitation to his Iranian counterpart to visit Riyadh. This time, however, a prospective dialogue between Tehran and Riyadh was marred by a sectarian crisis flaming in Iraq in June 2014.

President Rouhani's overture towards Israel has also remained unreciprocated. Both Rouhani and Zarif renounced Ahmadinejad's public "anti-Semitism" and his denial of the Holocaust. Unlike his predecessor, President Rouhani called the Holocaust a "reprehensible" act.⁶⁸ Additionally, Iran under Rouhani turned down confrontationist rhetoric towards Israel.⁶⁹ However, Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel, labeled Rouhani as "a wolf in sheep's clothing" and criticized any kind of compromise with Iran.⁷⁰ Israel has also emerged as the principal opponent of the Geneva Agreement, which was declared by Netanyahu as a "historic mistake."⁷¹

The change of government in Tehran, however, gave an impetus to Iran's relations with Oman and Turkey. Oman was among the few countries in the Gulf that strived to keep friendly relations with Iran. Partly for its close relations with Iran – and partly for its being afraid of the Saudi dominance – Oman has rejected further integration amongst the GCC countries. Sultan Qaboos bin Said of Oman was the first head of state to visit Tehran, on August 25, 2013, following the election of Rouhani. Then he was reportedly acting as a broker in paving the ground for nuclear negotiations between Iran

66 Dahlia Kholiaif, "Gulf States Hesitant About Iranian Overtures," *Aljazeera*, December 8, 2013, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/12/gulf-states-hesitant-about-iranian-overtures-2013127144157666140.html> (accessed on June 10, 2014); "Iran deal recasts regional politics," *Al-Monitor*, December 1, 2013, available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/12/iran-deal-recasts-middle-east-politics-nuclear-program.html> (accessed on June 10, 2014).

67 Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran Takes Charm Offensive to the Persian Gulf," *The New York Times*, December 4, 2013; Kholif, "Gulf States hesitant about Iranian overtures."

68 David Blair and Robert Tait, "Iran's Hassan Rouhani calls the Holocaust 'reprehensible,'" *The Telegraph*, September 25, 2103.

69 Meir Javedanfar, "Iran, Israel and the Politics of Gesture," *Al-Monitor*, February 5, 2014, available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/02/iran-israel-politics-gesture.html#> ; (accessed on June 10, 2014).

70 "Israel PM calls Iran leader 'wolf in sheep's clothing,'" *BBC News – Middle East*, October 2, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24354160> (accessed on June 10, 2014).

71 "Israeli Leaders Denounce Geneva Accord," *The New York Times*, November 14, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/25/world/middleeast/israeli-leaders-decry-iran-accord.html?_r=0 (accessed on June 10, 2014).

and the United States. In return, Rouhani paid a visit to Muscat on March 12, 2014. Besides its economic aspects, including a gas deal in which Iran will supply 10-billion cubic meters of gas annually through a 350-km pipeline, the visit has exposed the growing friendship between Oman and Iran.⁷²

Moderate foreign policy as proposed by President Rouhani was welcomed in Turkey. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and his Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Javad Zarif, have met on several occasions and displayed a close friendship. The previous Turkish perception of Iran as a destabilizing force in the region was replaced by an understanding that the moderate foreign policy of Rouhani might contribute to peace and stability to the region. Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan visited Tehran on January 28-29, 2014, when the parties signed a preferential trade agreement and a cooperation agreement to form a Joint Trade Committee. Additionally, Erdoğan and Rouhani signed a joint political declaration to establish a High-Level Cooperation Council, which meant that the two leaders are resolved to deepen bilateral relations between Ankara and Tehran.⁷³ The first meeting of the High-level Cooperation Council was held on June 9, on the sidelines of Rouhani's visit to Ankara.

Iran under Rouhani has also reinstated its relations with Hamas leadership. It is announced in early December 2013 that the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip had renewed its ties with Iran following the elections of Rouhani.⁷⁴ In addition to restoring its ties with Hamas, Iran has also re-established its relations with Fatah. Jibril Rajoub, deputy secretary of Fatah's Central Committee, visited Tehran on January 28, 2014 in order "to convey President Mahmoud Abbas's regards to the Iranian leadership and congratulate the Iranian people on the agreement with P5+1." Actually, the visit of Rajoub was an attempt on the part of Fatah leadership "to start a new chapter" in Palestine-Iran relations.⁷⁵

Notwithstanding the improvements recorded in Iran's ties with Oman, Turkey and the Palestinian organizations, the Rouhani administration could

72 Simeon Kerr and Najmeh Bozroghmehr, "Iran's Hassan Rouhani seals gas deal during visit to Oman," *Financial Times*, March 13, 2014. See also, Basma Mubarak Saeed, "Oman, Iranian Rapprochement and a GCC Union," *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*, May 6, 2014, available at <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2014/01/20141218365065800.htm> (accessed on June 10, 2014).

73 Bayram Sinkaya, "Turkish PM Erdoğan's Visit to Tehran: A New Milestone in Relations Between Turkey and Iran," *ORSAM Foreign Policy Analysis*, January 31, 2014, available at <http://www.orsam.org.tr/en/showArticle.aspx?ID=2586> (accessed on June 10, 2014).

74 "Zahar: Hamas renewed ties with Iran following Rouhani election," *The Jerusalem Post*, December 10, 2013.

75 Ali Hashem, "Jibril Rajoub calls for Iran to deal with 'all the Palestinian groups'," *Al-Monitor*, February 8, 2014, available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/02/interview-jibril-rajoub-palestine-iran.html> (accessed on June 10, 2014); Ali Hashem, "Iran Diversifies its Palestinian Strategy," *Al-Monitor*, February 14, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/iw/originals/2014/02/iran-palestinian-strategy-diversifies.html#> (accessed on June 10, 2014).

not have established sustainable relations with the countries in transition – Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. This was partly because the countries in transition have been dragged into domestic turmoil and could not have formed sustainable political and economic structures, and this prevented the development of consistent foreign relations. As for the strategic capacity and capabilities of Iran, although the factional bickering inside the country has been considerably contained with the election of Rouhani, the dire economic conditions could not yet have been rehabilitated. Most importantly, President Rouhani has given priority in his foreign policy to a diplomatic solution to the nuclear controversy, the restoration of ties with the West and neighboring countries.⁷⁶

Conclusion

The polarization and the Cold War in the Middle East preceding the outbreak of the Arab Spring have profoundly affected responses of the regional actors toward the social movements across the region. The regional politics have been predominantly occupied by an outgoing rivalry between two blocs, headed by Saudi Arabia and Iran. The differences between the two sides have been too extensive to resolve most of the regional disputes and crises ranging from Yemen and Bahrain to Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria through cooperation. This rivalry was not only intensified by differences and strategic calculations of regional countries but also by the apparent US support for the Saudi-led bloc. Having failed to persuade most of the neighboring countries of its so-called “benign” regional vision, Iran under Ahmadinejad has engaged in confronting the Saudi and American powers in the Middle East.⁷⁷

Against such a background, Iran has seen the Arab Spring as an opportunity to undermine the rival bloc and to confront US influence in the region. The first waves of upheavals that hit pro-American conservative regimes in Tunisia and Egypt have given credit to the official Iranian view of the Arab Spring. Iran’s capacity to influence the course of events, however, has been marred by a number of factors, including dire economic conditions in the country and international pressure to isolate the regime in Tehran. Additionally, the emergence of growing factional divisions in Tehran around the same time the mass upheavals swept the Arab streets has prevented Iran from developing a consistent strategy toward the Arab Spring. Moreover, the subsequent waves of the Arab Spring—particularly in Syria—have turned against the interests of Iran. Thus, not only has Iran failed to expand its regional influence riding on the Arab Spring coattails, it has also faced new challenges, such as how to defeat strong opposition to its principal and only ally in Damascus. Increasingly,

76 Pinar Arıkan, “Change in Foreign Policy of Iran under Rouhani Government and its Reflections in Domestic Politics,” *ORSAM Review of Regional Affairs*, no.1 (March 2014) available at http://www.orsam.org.tr/en/enUploads/Article/Files/2014320_orsambrief.pdf (accessed on June 10, 2014).

77 Kayhan Barzegar, “Regionalism in Iran’s Foreign Policy,” *Iran Review*, February 8, 2010.

Iran's strategic goal of keeping Assad in power has led to the securitization and militarization of its approach to Syria.

Hassan Rouhani, who came to power in Iran in August 2013, has set new horizons for Iranian foreign policy: to replace confrontation with accommodation and constructive interaction. To that end, he has reached a preliminary compromise with the United States over the controversial nuclear program. Rouhani's initial success toward achieving improved relations with some countries in the region notwithstanding, much of his efforts to do so have been regarded more as an attempt to regain Iran's lost grounds in the preceding years rather than neutralizing current regional challenges.

The lack of a dramatic change in Iran's foreign policy toward the region could be accounted for in several ways. To begin with, and despite the relative thaw in Iran's relations with the United States, the regional geopolitics has yet to shift in Iran's favor. The ongoing conflicts between Iran and regional and international actors continue to constrain Iran's options and maneuverability in the Middle East. Secondly, President Rouhani has given precedence to the "normalization" of Iran's relations with the West over dealing with regional problems on the assumption that the former will positively affect the latter. Finally, most of the regional issues have been securitized by the Iranian regime. It should be noted, however, that President Rouhani, like all Iranian presidents before him, lacks the ability to fully control security policies, despite the fact that he comes from the security sector and has good relations with the security organizations. That may explain why it is very critical for him to cut a deal with the Western countries on the nuclear issue. If he could successfully solve the nuclear issue, he could then claim further authority on shaping the country's security and foreign policies, including even adopting a new approach to the Middle East.

Bibliography

- Ahmadi, Hamid, "Iran and the Arab Spring: Why Haven't Iranians Followed the Arabs in Waging Revolution," *Asian Politics & Policy*, Vol.5, No.3, 2013.
- Alfoneh, Ali, "Mixed Response in Iran: Middle Eastern Upheavals," *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol.18, No.3, Summer 2011.
- Arikan, Pinar, "Change in Foreign Policy of Iran under Rouhani Government and its Reflections in Domestic Politics," *ORSAM Review of Regional Affairs*, No.1 (March 2014).
- Atai, Farhad, "Iran within the Political Dynamics of the Middle East," *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, Vol.2, No.4, Winter 2012.
- Ayoob, Mohammad, "The Arab Spring: Its Geostrategic Significance," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 19, No.3, Fall 2012.

- Badran, Tony, "The Syria-Iran Alliance," *In Focus Quarterly*, vol.3, no.1 (Spring 2009), available at <http://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/825/the-syria-iran-alliance> (accessed on July 5, 2014).
- Barzegar, Kayhan, "Arab Uprising and the Changing Geopolitics in the Middle East," *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly*, Vol.10, No 1-2, Winter-Spring 2012.
- Barzegar, Kayhan, "The Arab Revolutions and Iran's Regional Policy," *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly*, Vol.10, No 3-4, Summer-Fall 2012.
- Chubin, Shahram, "Iran and the Arab Spring: Ascendancy Frustrated", *Gulf Research Center (GRC) Paper*, September 2012.
- Furtig, Henner, "Iran and the Arab Spring: Between Expectations and Disillusion," *German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Working Papers*, No.241, November 2013.
- Gause III, F. Gregory, "Saudi Arabia: Ira, Iran, the Regional Power Balance, and the Sectarian Question," *Strategic Insights*, Vol. 6, No.2, March 2007.
- Haji-Yousefi, Amir Mohammad, "Iran and the 2011 Arab Revolutions: Perceptions and Actions," *Discourse – An Iranian Quarterly*, Vol.10, No 1-2, Winter-Spring 2012.
- Henderson, Simon, "GCC Summit will Gauge Regional Confidence in U.S. Policy," *WINEP Policy Watch*, No. 2180, December 9, 2013.
- Jamshidi, Mohammad Hossein, "Unity, key to success of Islamic Awakening movement," *Islamic Awakening*, No.3, June 2012.
- Jones, Peter, "Hopes and Disappointment: Iran and the Arab Spring," *Survival*, Vol 55, No.4, August-September 2013.
- Kaya, Dalia D., Frederic Wehrey and M. Scott Doran, "Arab Spring, Persian Winter: Will Iran Emerge the Winner from the Arab Revolt", *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2011.
- Keshavarz, Abbas, "Public demands in the Middle East are more religious than political," *Islamic Awakening*, No.3, June 2012.
- Khallaji, Mehdi, "Iran's Policy Confusion about Bahrain," *WINEP Policy Watch*, No. 1823, June 27, 2011.
- Kiani, Mohammad Reza, "Iran's Foreign Policy Under Rouhani," Institute for Middle East Strategic Studies, September 7, 2013, available at <http://en.cmess.ir/default.aspx?tabid=98&ArticleId=567> (accessed on May 10, 2014).

- Maloney, Suzanne, "Iran: The Bogyman", in *The Arab Awakening*, (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2011).
- Mohseni, Payam, "The Islamic Awakening: Iran's Grand Narrative of Arab Uprisings," *Middle East Brief* (Brandeis University, Crown Center for Middle East Studies), No.71, April 2013.
- Monshipouri, Mahmood and Manochehr Dorraj, "Iran's Foreign Policy: A Shifting Strategic Landscape," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 20, No.4, Winter 2013.
- Parchami, Ali, "The 'Arab Spring': the View from Tehran," *Contemporary Politics*, Vol.8, No.1, March 2012.
- Parsi, Trita and Reza Marashi, "Arab Spring Seen from Tehran: The Geopolitical Contest for the Region's Hearts and Minds", *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, No. 2, Summer 2011.
- Pletka, Daniel and Frederick W. Kagan, "America vs. Iran: The Competition for the Future of Middle East," *AEI*, January 2014.
- Poursaid, Farzad, "A Comparative Study on Iran's Islamic Revolution and Egypt's Revolution," *Discourse – An Iranian Quarterly*, Vol.10, No 1-2, Winter-Spring 2012.
- Rafati, Naysan, "After the Arab Spring: Power Shift in the Middle East?: Iran and the Arab Spring," IDEAS reports - special reports, Kitchen, Nicholas (ed.) SR011. *LSE IDEAS*, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, May 2012.
- Ryan, Curtis, "The New Arab Cold War and Struggle for Syria," *Middle East Report*, No. 242, Spring 2012.
- Sinkaya, Bayram, "Arab Baharı Sürecinde İran'ın Suriye Politikası," *SETA Analiz*, No.53, April 2012.
- Sinkaya, Bayram, "İran-Suriye İlişkileri ve Suriye'de Halk İsyanı" (Iran-Syria Relations and Popular Unrest in Syria), *Ortadoğu Analiz*, Vol.3, No.33, September 2011.
- Telhami, Shibley, "Arab Perspectives on Iran's Role in a Changing Middle East", Wilson Center, *The Changing Security Architecture in the Middle East*, Issue 2, 2013.
- Torabi, Ghasem, "Arab Revolutions and Iran's Security," *Discourse – An Iranian Quarterly*, Vol.10, No 1-2, Winter-Spring 2012.
- Vakil, Sanam, "Iran: Balancing East against West," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol.29, No.4 2006.

- Valbjørn, Morten & André Bank, "The New Arab Cold War: Rediscovering the Arab Dimension of Middle East Regional Politics," *Review of International Studies*, Vol.38, No.1, 2012.
- Valbjørn, Morten and André Bank, "Signs of a New Arab Cold War: The 2006 Lebanon War and the Sunni-Shi'i Divide," *Middle East Report*, No. 242, Spring 2007.
- Yehiav, Ayellet, "The Anti-Iranian Front: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 11, No.1, March 2007.
- Zweiri, Mahjoub, "Revolutionary Iran and Arab Revolts: Observations on Iranian Foreign Policy and its Approaches," Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, Doha, September 2012.