

Iran and Turkey after Egypt: Time for Regional Re-alignments?

By Ruth Hanau Santini and Emiliano Alessandri

Both Iran and Turkey have a major stake in how the political landscape in North Africa and the Middle East is reshaped in the months ahead. Tehran and Ankara have developed their own separate narratives on regional events that take credit for providing the political inspiration for the Arab uprisings. Simultaneously, they have aimed to re-interpret reality on the ground to deflect attention away from their own domestic problems. While regional uprisings (with the possible exception of a resurgence of Kurdish separatism) do not necessarily threaten the stability of the Turkish state, Iran is experiencing its own waves of protests.

As European and American leaders formulate policies toward North Africa and the Middle East, Iran and Turkey will have to be factored in and engaged in very different ways. This commentary offers a snapshot of Iranian and Turkish perceptions and reactions to the democratic protests in the Arab world, and explores ways in which the United States and

the European Union might interact with Tehran and Ankara in channeling the currents of change.

Shifting Narratives in Tehran and Ankara

In Iran's initial public commentary on the first uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, Iranian leaders portrayed the protests as "Islamic awakenings" inspired by Iran's 1979 revolution. As events in Libya unfolded, the Iranian narrative shifted away from the protests to criticize the United States and its allies for staging a military intervention, and for being motivated—according to Iranian leaders—primarily by oil interests. Tehran's narrative on Libya pointedly ignored United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution 1973, and the endorsement of the Arab League for the intervention.

As the transition in Egypt has become more complex and protests have spread to Syria, Bahrain and Yemen, the Iranian leadership has muted its commentary on the uprisings—clearly concerned about its own domestic situation.¹ To divert domestic and international attention away from the political, economic and social aspects of the Arab uprisings, Iran has now pivoted to

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¹ Shayan Ghajar, "Potential Unrest over Economic Crisis Dominates Iran's Worries for New Year," *CMW*, March 1, 2011 <http://www.insideiran.org/media-analysis/potential-unrest-over-economic-crisis-dominates-iran's-worries-for-new-year/>

condemn the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and especially Saudi Arabia, for helping to suppress Shi'a-led protests in Bahrain. Tehran has accused the Saudis of occupying Bahrain and abusing the Shi'a majority there, seeking to exploit contentious sectarian issues. Iran's most recent narrative shift skips over non-sectarian protests in Syria to spotlight the Gulf region's traditionally marginalized Arab Shi'a population.

Tehran's new narrative also highlights the dilemmas faced by Gulf monarchies. With democratic transitions sweeping the region, authoritarian rulers who resist reform could eventually lose critical U.S. support—in spite of years of close political and security relations with Washington—leaving them to confront angry, dissatisfied, and now fearless populations, alone.

Turkey's leadership first hailed the protests in Tunisia and Egypt as a sign that Muslims in the Arab world aspire to good governance and democracy. They presented Turkey as the source of inspiration for the regional democratic political forces. Ankara initially overlooked the strong endogenous factors in Tunisia and Egypt that drove the protests, until Arab protestors, themselves, pointed to multiple sources of inspiration. These included examples of peaceful political change in countries as diverse as Indonesia and the former Communist states of Eastern Europe.²

As Libya became the focal point of international attention, the Turkish government became more preoccupied with maintaining its "zero problems with neighbors" doctrine and with preserving Turkey's economic interests and investments in Libya (around \$30 billion).³ Turkey criticized the

February 26 UN Security Council sanctions against Libya, and was even more vocal in opposing the adoption of the UNSC 1973. It eventually acquiesced on the issue of air strikes only after intense American pressure, and after NATO stepped in to lead the operation with contributions from Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Turkey has clearly been caught in a difficult balancing act in North Africa and the Middle East—between endorsing change and avoiding interference in the countries' internal affairs. Syria has proven especially problematic in this regard. Turkey's new visa-free zone includes Syria, Lebanon Jordan and Libya; and Turkey shares an 800-km border with Syria. There are genuine fears in Ankara that instability in Syria will spill over into Turkish territory.⁴ Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu have both made personal appeals to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for gradual political liberalization inside Syria and to defuse regional tensions.

In sum, Iran's rhetoric seeks to downplay the risk of domestic contagion, while Turkish rhetoric suggests that a transformed and more democratic region will present more foreign policy opportunities than domestic challenges. However, the re-emergence of Egypt as a major player in the Middle East could erode the impact of Turkish rhetoric and its soft power in the region. On the other hand, Iran seems better poised than Turkey to turn the present crisis into opportunity, at least in the short-term.

² "Arab World Political Unrest," *C-SPAN*, March 23, 2011
<http://www.c-spanarchives.org/program/WorldUp&showFullAbstract=1>

³ Semih Idiz, "Is there a line to toe on Libya?" *Daily News* (Turkey), March 10, 2011

<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=is-there-a-line-to-toe-on-libya-2011-03-10>

⁴ "Turkey's Edogan urges Syria to go ahead with reforms," *Daily News*, March 28, 2011

<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=the-head-of-intelligence-visited-syria-2011-03-28>

Iran: Seeking External Opportunities to Move Beyond Domestic Challenges

At present, the balance of power in the Persian Gulf seems to be shifting in Iran's favor, just as it did in 2003 with the U.S.-led war in Iraq.⁵ Regional power shifts, rising oil prices, and progress in its nuclear program all seem to have combined to boost Iran's external ambitions.

The authority of Saudi Arabia, which has long served as the counter-balance to Iran, the bastion of regional stability, and the guarantor of Israel's survival, has been severely weakened by the ongoing turmoil. The weakening of Saudi Arabia and destabilization of other Arab regimes with significant Shi'a populations has exacerbated the traditional Sunni-Shi'a divide, and provided Tehran with an opportunity to ratchet up its pan-Shi'a rhetoric and revitalize fears of its alleged efforts to forge a "Shi'a crescent" across the Middle East.⁶ In North Africa, the replacement of conservative and pro-Western regimes with more inclusive governments further suggests that regional states will intensify their diplomatic and economic relations with Iran—as is already the case with Egypt.

The Iranian government has also countered its international isolation by strengthening relations with China and with the new Lebanese government (dominated by Hezbollah). It has also resorted to military and diplomatic provocations. In February 2011, for example, two Iranian warships passed through the Suez Canal for the first time in decades en route to Syria, much to the alarm

and consternation of Israel and other regional states.

Beyond Middle East politics, international efforts to halt the Iranian government's nuclear weapons program seem to have reached an impasse after attempts in Istanbul in January 2011 failed to revive stalled talks. The turmoil in the Middle East has diverted international attention away from U.S., European and Israeli discussions of a potential military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities. Sanctions have failed to make a significant impact on the Iranian economy, thanks to the government's subsidy reform program.

In the meantime, Iran continues to make progress on its nuclear weapons program, as indicated in a series of recent authoritative international reports. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), for example, assesses that Iran's nuclear program is moving forward again after being temporarily impaired by the Stuxnet computer worm; while the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) concludes that Iran will reach "the nuclear threshold" in the next two years.⁷

On the domestic front Iran has been greatly alarmed by the pace with which the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes have tumbled and by how quickly the uprisings have spread to Libya, Palestine, Syria, Yemen, Oman, Bahrain and Kuwait. The grievances driving the Arab protests—economic frustration, demands for political rights and the fight for dignity—are the same grievances underpinning dissent in Iran. This alarm has spurred an intense effort by the Iranian government to tighten its grip on the leaders of domestic protests.

Two years after suppressing the "Green movement" that emerged after the disputed electoral victory of hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009, movement leaders

⁵ "Iran Will Benefit from this Arab Spring," *Financial Times*, February 24, 2011
http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2011/0224_iran_malone.asp

⁶ Moshe Ma'oz, "The Shi'i Crescent: Myth and Reality," Saban Center for Middle East Policy paper, Brookings, November 2007
http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2007/11_middle_east_maoz/11_middle_east_maoz.pdf

⁷ IISS, "Iran's Ballistic Missile Capabilities: A net assessment"
<http://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/irans-ballistic-missile-capabilities/>

remain under arrest. The government has increased media censorship and state control over web-based communications. Today, the Green movement lacks coherent leadership and a common vision for change. No broad, united coalition of protesters, voicing economic and political grievances, has emerged yet in Iran; the Iranian government has taken steps to ensure that the situation stays that way. Instead of making concessions to the opposition, the Iranian leadership has become increasingly repressive.

The further evolution of reform in North Africa could prove especially challenging for Iran's domestic crackdown. If Egypt evolves into a robust democratic system, it could undercut Tehran's domestic narratives and populist rhetoric as well as erode Iran's standing with Arab countries. A fully democratic Egypt—with civilian control of the military, an empowered legislature, and an independent judiciary, where the Muslim Brotherhood also plays a political role that respects the separation of religion in the public and private spheres—would serve as a powerful alternative to the political model Iran has long presented to the Middle East.

Turkey: Trying to Match Ambition with Reality

The Arab upheavals have presented some significant near-term political dilemmas for Turkey. A new Middle East, dominated by democratic parties with a more Islamist perspective could become a more integrated region. The Middle East's latent pan-Arab nationalist legacies could be revived. A pan-Arab discourse could lead to a more assertive foreign policy that would be less aligned with the United States and, possibly, the West in general.

Under these circumstances, a democratic Egypt would likely emerge as the key Arab voice on pivotal political and security matters, including the Middle East peace process and relations with Israel and the Palestinians. A

more integrated and assertively Arab Middle East would undercut Turkey's emerging role as a regional leader—a role Turkey has increasingly relished over the last several years. Turkey could also be faced with new rivalries and tensions around its borders.

In this respect, engaging effectively with Cairo during the transition in Egypt is critical for Ankara, but this has proven difficult. Despite the ruling, moderately Islamic, Justice and Development Party's (AKP) support for the popular reform movements, the military—not grassroots parties or other political forces—is now leading the transition in Egypt. Behind the veil of Turkey's pragmatic regional diplomacy, the AKP is wary of the military leaderships in the Middle East, especially given its own past experience with the Turkish military.

The current political clout and role of the military in Egypt is reminiscent of the role the Turkish military played before the emergence of the AKP. At the time, Turkey's armed forces acted as guardians of secularism, "drawing the red lines of Kemalism," and directly influencing the political process.⁸ The difference in the Egyptian case is the lack of an ideology justifying, at least on paper, the extensive role the military is playing. The AKP's path to power has been inseparable from its power struggle with the Turkish military. The military was extremely reluctant to relinquish its leading role in Turkish domestic politics. It also tried to block the ascent of political Islamic groups in Turkey, even when their rise was part of a larger popular movement for political emancipation and democracy.

In Egypt, the army has declared itself eager to leave the political stage and get back to its barracks, but only after guaranteeing its institutional and economic privileges.

⁸ Omer Taspinar, "Egypt and the Turkish Model," *Today's Zaman*, February 7, 2011
<http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist-234723-egypt-and-the-turkish-model.html>

However, many have questioned the democratic credentials of the Egyptian military, citing several questionable actions during and after the uprisings in Cairo—including aggressively hounding protesters in Tahrir Square, deciding against lifting the emergency law and issuing a decree against further demonstrations. The military has also been accused of committing acts of torture and violence, especially against young women protestors. As the Egyptian youth movement has yet to offer concrete proposals for the opposition parties to incorporate into their platforms ahead of the September parliamentary elections, some in Turkey fear that the Egyptian military might change the rules of the game while it still can.

It will be very difficult for Turkey's ruling elites to exert pressure on the new transitional governments to make sure they do not cross democratic boundaries. However, Turkey could play this role more effectively than other Western countries if it avoids the mistake of selectively engaging only those groups with which its moderate Islamic elites have an affinity. Turkish leaders can offer the "AKP story" as a broader narrative of emancipation and participation and of political peripheries moving to the center—as opposed to a narrower one focused on the revival of religious identities and the struggle among competing interpretations of modernity. In this frame, Turkey's journey toward democracy could provide a persuasive "post-Islamist," as well as post-repression, discourse for a new Middle East.

Transatlantic Implications

The United States, like Turkey, is looking for a new discourse to match the sweeping changes in the Middle East, having first sketched out a vision in President Obama's 2009 Cairo speech. Washington is developing a determined, if cautious, approach to supporting the democracy movements in North Africa.

The EU has been slower in responding and more timid in formulating a narrative and approach for its 27 member states. The EU is now in the process of re-assessing its regional relations as well as its concept of the "South Mediterranean" as a framework for engaging with North Africa and the Middle East. The EU also has limited leverage over the actions of Iran and Turkey in the region, having suspended trade negotiations and contractual relations with Iran, and having failed to keep its promise of enlargement with Turkey.

The U.S., EU, Iran and Turkey all share a common interest in avoiding a full-scale regional conflict—a risk that has increased with the civil war in Libya. This creates an opportunity for more transatlantic engagement to mitigate the risk. Iran's calculus that the current level of unrest will turn to Tehran's advantage, without it having to lift a finger, makes it an especially difficult interlocutor. Turkey's interest in the stabilization and democratization of the region, on the other hand, highlights a broad alignment with the rest of Europe and the West.

In the case of Iran, the United States and the EU will have to combine engagement with coercion to try to dampen Tehran's enthusiasm for exploiting regional unrest. Nuclear negotiations will have to be coupled with political talks offering cooperation on key areas of Iranian public interest (for example, on health, education and visas), as well as outreach to Iranian opposition forces and protesters. Given the shifting regional context, smart and selective engagement with Iran, rather than straightforward containment, may prove to be the best accelerator of change. Concerning Turkey, U.S. and EU diplomats will have to put fears of a Turkish foreign policy "drift" aside, and focus on ensuring maximum coordination in their outreach to Egypt, the Maghreb, and the greater Middle East.