

ARAB SPRING SEEN FROM TEHRAN

The Geopolitical Contest for the Region's Hearts and Minds

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The Middle East is undergoing its most dynamic transformation since World War I, when Mark Sykes and Georges Picot divided the region into colonized spheres of influence amid the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Nearly a century later, with the toppling of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and the ongoing struggles in Yemen, Syria, Libya, and Bahrain, all states in the region—or involved in the region—have been forced to reassess their policies and alliances.

These developments have also permanently shattered the frames through which the Middle East was understood, or presented, by various governments. The defining struggle is not between ‘moderates’ and ‘radicals,’ at least not if the definition of ‘moderate’ is an Arab state allied with the United States and at virtual peace with Israel.¹ The deposed autocrats in Cairo and Tunis both fit this false definition of ‘moderate.’ Nor is the struggle between Islamic and secular forces. The rallying call of protesters across the region has been democracy and dignity, not Islam and sharia.² And to the extent that protests in Bahrain have taken on a sectarian tone, it is arguably due to the efforts of the Al-Khalifa royal family and its Saudi Arabian protector—both considered ‘moderates’ in the old frame.

More than religion or ideology, it is geopolitics and hegemony that have come to the fore as the central factors shaping how governments are responding to unprecedented regional unrest. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in Iran. To the Islamic Republic, recent developments have shaken up not only existing political systems (including its own), but also its rivalry for regional influence with Israel, Saudi

▷ Iranian students demonstrating against the United States and “world imperialism,” Tehran, November 4, 2010. *Abedin Taherkenareh/EPA/Corbis*

Arabia, and the U.S. on one side, and Turkey as the third vertex in what can be seen as an emerging triangle of competition. Iranian decision-makers see this shock as changing the context of the rivalry rather than ending it, and creating challenges and opportunities for all sides.



Overall, Iran's geopolitical strategy aims to consolidate the Islamic Republic as a regional power. The cornerstones of its strategy are: 1) Improving, or at the very least managing, ties with immediate neighbors and key Islamic countries. Relations with Turkey and Saudi Arabia are key factors in Iran's regional positioning for influence in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and elsewhere. 2) Consolidating Iranian regional preeminence with indigenous technical capabilities. The country's nuclear program, missile tests, and satellite launch are all facets of this strategic track. 3) Standing up to the West. In the words of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran intends "not to give in" to Western pressure.³ Iran's approach in the nuclear standoff is a good example of this conviction.

Historical precedent has shown Iran that Western powers tend to accept the status of a regional power when that power becomes formidable; China, India, and Brazil are often cited as examples. The Islamic Republic is counting on such an eventual acceptance. The key virtue from Iran's perspective has been patience. Decision-makers in Tehran know that the cost of this strategy is high—sanctions, isolation, and conflict are not negligible—but they believe that Iran must assume the role of an accepted regional power. If the West insists on making Iran yield on issues of contention through pressure, in particular its nuclear program, support for Hezbollah and Hamas, and human rights violations, Iranian strategy will continue to be predicated on patience and a conviction that it can eventually succeed by playing the long game. If nothing else, this serves as a sober reminder to its rivals that Tehran will not back down from the current standoff, as Iranian decision-makers believe that if the Islamic Republic does not "give up," the other side will do so in due course.⁴

As this rivalry unfolds, the changing Arab political scene has demonstrated both the relevance of the Arab street and its ability to play a decisive role in the region's future, something Tehran has long trumpeted in opposing the regional status quo. Thus, Iran sees a continuation of the Arab democracy wave as a challenge not only to the status quo powers investing in an order that suppresses the streets, but also to the powers that claim to champion them.

Tehran has identified this as the likely new fault line in the region, and one that will be under increasing strain as each side in this triangle of competition positions itself to address the vacuum left by a declining U.S.–Israeli–Saudi status quo. In the past, this rivalry has played out in both hard and soft power arenas, but as Arab political upheaval persists, non-diplomatic hard-power options in the region become untenable without dangerously exacerbating instability. Knowing this, it is soft power—the battle for hearts and minds—that is becoming increasingly important to decision-makers in Tehran.

To that end, Iran faces a question, as by extension do its rivals: If Iran's main instrument for achieving regional leadership has been its soft power among the region's

populations—rooted in a rejection of the U.S.–Israeli–Saudi status quo combined with financial and political investment in political factions across the region—will the regional shifts enable the Islamic Republic to exploit popular Arab victories? Or will the emergence of a more empowered Arab street undermine the foundation of Iran’s soft power, thereby allowing its rivals to exert greater influence? Six months into the Arab Spring, Tehran’s strategy—cautious and reactive due to internal problems and elite paralysis, and predicated on the perceived limitations of its rivals—has come into sharper focus.

The Status Quo

A crucial question is how Iran regards the U.S.–Israeli–Saudi vertex as it struggles to adjust to a region in flux. Tehran has long viewed the ‘alliance’ as a declining force in the region, and the changing Arab political scene has only confirmed its perception. The Iranian government’s reluctance to negotiate with the U.S. is not necessarily rooted in an ideological opposition to the idea of talking or improving relations with Washington. Instead, hard-liners in Tehran fear that any relationship with the U.S. would require Iranian acquiescence to status quo regional policies, thereby stripping Tehran of its independence and forcing it to follow America’s investment in Arab dictatorships rather than the Arab street. Since its inception, the Islamic Republic has calculated that the Arab street would ultimately overthrow pro-American dictatorships and the balance of forces that favored Israel. Iran’s long-term regional security calculation has thus been predicated on championing the Arab street and rejecting any engagement with Washington designed to rehabilitate Iran as a compliant U.S. ally. Iranian decision-makers see no example in the Middle East—past or present—of relations with the U.S. that are based on equal footing. Patron-client relations are an unpopular and inconvenient regional truth.

Decision-makers in Tehran now think that Israel and Saudi Arabia are also faced with severe strategic challenges, which in turn limit U.S. flexibility to address regional upheaval.

Over the past year, Israel has seen the interests of two of its foremost regional allies diverge from its own, perhaps irreparably. Turkish–Israeli ties reached an all-time low after Israel’s incursion into Gaza in 2008 and its attack on the Flotilla of Freedom in 2010; in the view of many analysts, they cannot be resurrected. Israel has also lost its most senior and strategically important Arab partner, the Mubarak government in Egypt, with no subsequent clarity on how future governments in Cairo will frame ties. U.S. diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks revealed the extent of collaboration between Israel and Mubarak’s Egypt against Iran.⁵

The challenge for Saudi Arabia was crystallized when the House of Saud drew a line in the sand as protests swept through neighboring Bahrain. Its objection to U.S. support for revolts in Tunisia and Egypt unheeded, Riyadh feared that American ‘betrayal’ could inevitably reach the Persian Gulf. The prospect of a Sunni monarchy on its border being

overthrown, or even entering a power-sharing arrangement, and Shiite communities being empowered as a result hit too close to home for Saudi decision-makers, who flatly rejected American efforts to negotiate peaceful reform in Bahrain. Instead, Saudi Arabia ignored U.S. pleas for calm and invaded the Sunni minority-led nation with the Bahraini ruling family's consent, using force to crush a popular uprising.

Iran thus sees an unusual period of tensions between Washington and its allies compounding the challenges facing the U.S.–Israeli–Saudi vertex. While the U.S. has recognized that the regional status quo is untenable and is struggling to balance its values (democratization) and its strategic interests (support for Israel, secure access to energy), Israel and Saudi Arabia view regional developments quite differently.

Martin Kramer of Israel's conservative Shalem Center put his finger on the central point of contention during the February 2011 Herzliya Conference. Questioning America's conclusion that the regional status quo is unsustainable, Kramer was unabashed: "In Israel, we are for the status quo. Not only do we believe the status quo is sustainable, we think it's the job of the U.S. to sustain it."⁶

Concern and defiance in Riyadh are no less palpable. *The New York Times* has reported that according to an Arab official who was briefed on talks between President Barack Obama and King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, the Saudi monarch was unwavering: "King Abdullah has been clear that Saudi Arabia will never allow Shia rule in Bahrain—never."⁷

Iran's perception of the U.S.–Israeli–Saudi vertex as a declining regional power, incapable of shifting its policies in accordance with a new power distribution, seems to have locked. Although the proverbial screws have been tightened through sanctions to increase Iran's political and economic international isolation, the Islamic Republic actually sees itself as less isolated regionally. Its confidence is reinforced by the fall of pro-American autocrats in Egypt and Tunisia; volatility across the region that has destabilized many others; empowered pro-Iranian political factions in Iraq and Lebanon; and a belief in Iran's indispensable role in any long-term solution to stabilize U.S. national security interests in nonproliferation, terrorism, energy security, Afghanistan, Iraq, and even the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

From the outset of the Obama administration, decision-makers in Tehran have reiterated that tactical changes in America's posture were insufficient to realign relations between the two countries. For the Iranian government, only a strategic shift by Washington—unlikely in Iran's view, given concerted push-back by Israel, the U.S. Congress, and the Saudis—could break the U.S.–Iran stalemate.⁸ Thus, going forward, Iran sees more short to medium term value in shelving the notion of rapprochement with America that Iranian reformists had entertained and instead pursuing the strategic objective of hastening Washington's military exit from the region.

Barring an unforeseen increase in U.S. strategic flexibility, Iranian hard-liners seek a ‘codified rivalry’—one that will enable Iran to continue building soft power on the Arab street by maintaining its role as the region’s leading critic of America and Israel, while ensuring that the rivalry does not spill over into open military confrontation. Within the context of a codified rivalry, Tehran’s interest in tactical collaboration with Washington may actually increase as its certainty in the decline of the U.S.–Israeli–Saudi vertex grows.

Sanctions—both United Nations Security Council measures and American-led ‘coordinated national measures’—have hurt Iran’s economic health writ large, yet decision-makers in Tehran maintain their refusal to yield through pressure. After both sets of sanctions failed to change Iran’s strategic calculus, the Islamic Republic viewed its position vis-à-vis the U.S. as having been strengthened. Iran’s hardened stance has put the ball back in America’s court, effectively asking, “Now what are you going to do?”

Iran correctly estimated that Russia and China would not support additional UN Security Council sanctions in the short to medium term. Consequently, the U.S. and European Union strategy will focus on expanding ‘coordinated national measures,’ or sanctions by a ‘coalition of the willing’ in an effort to show Iran the cost of its policies. However, convincing an already hesitant set of allies with long-standing economic ties to Iran—including Japan, South Korea, India, and South Africa—to sign on to another round of unilateral sanctions will inevitably require the U.S. to strike diplomatic quid pro quos and reinvigorate direct diplomacy with Iran. This is no small task, given the domestic political constraints that a hostile Congress presents.

Against this backdrop, decision-makers in Tehran are pushing a public narrative that frames recent popular protests in the Middle East as Islam/Iran-inspired. Privately, they acknowledge that the regional dynamic is far more fluid than their public narrative suggests. They believe that it nonetheless works against a status quo that has long favored U.S. interests. The Iranian government sees increased instability throughout the region as a way to deflect pressure and exploit fissures within the international community. Iran’s hardened stance toward the U.S. reflects how a group of decision-makers in Tehran feels cautiously stronger on the international scene than the U.S.-led narrative of sanctions, Stuxnet computer virus, and secret assassinations suggests.⁹

Iranian Self-Perception

While decision-makers in Tehran see regional unrest (with the exception of Syria) strengthening their hand in the short run, they remain cautious of their ability to draw long-lasting profit from the fall of pro-American dictatorships. In Iran’s view, the U.S.–Israeli–Saudi vertex is in a decline set in motion by the invasion of Iraq and increasingly evident through region-wide protests, creating a power and leadership

vacuum that the Islamic Republic seeks to fill. Although Iran has long anticipated this moment, it knows that there are additional contenders for power. It also understands how its ambitions could be thwarted both by the nature of the vacuum and by its own position in the region.

As the only majority Shiite, Persian state in a region dominated by Sunnis and/or Arabs, Iran has historically suffered from an acute sense of strategic loneliness: it considers none of its regional allies to be ‘natural,’ and its experience with extra-regional superpowers has left its decision-makers convinced that their security depends on self-sufficiency. The notion that Iran is destined to be *primus inter pares* (first among equals) in regional decision-making is deeply ingrained in its identity, regardless of the system of governance or political leadership of the day. Iran sees itself as the odd man out in a region that it nevertheless seeks to lead.

Modern history has taught Iran that hard power alone will not facilitate regional leadership. Even though Tehran’s Arab neighbors recognized Iranian military superiority in the 1970s, the late shah understood that he could neither obtain nor maintain a preeminent position in the Persian Gulf through arms and oil alone; Iran needed to be seen as a legitimate power in the eyes of the Arab street as well. The shah also realized that Iran could not forever treat the Arabs as enemies and counterbalance them through Iranian military dominance. Not only was a more conciliatory policy necessary to gain legitimacy for Iranian domination; befriending the Arabs was the most efficient way to guarantee Iran’s long-term security. By the mid-1970s, Iran was at its peak. It had befriended Egypt, neutralized Iraq, quadrupled its oil income, and established its regional preeminence. Yet, the shah never managed to bridge the Sunni–Shiite and Persian–Arab divides. To achieve that, soft power was needed, of which the shah’s Iran was in short supply.¹⁰

The Iranian revolutionaries who took power in 1979 recognized this and sought to bridge the divide between Persians and Arabs through the ideology of political Islam. Although this strategy has been abysmally unsuccessful with ruling Arab elites, who feared the ideological force of the clerics more than the military force of the shah, Iran’s promotion of political Islam and its anti-imperialist posture have won it respect on the Arab street. As such, Iran’s self-perception of regional leadership is not based on military superiority, but rather on its political and financial investment in various regional movements and its ability to exploit popular frustration over domestic political issues and injustices in the region such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Turkey Rising?

The greatest challenge that Iran sees going forward is the emergence in the region of a foreign policy realignment by states that have traditionally followed America’s

lead. The impact of Turkey's shift is evident to Tehran: Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is one of only two world leaders to poll higher among Arabs than Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.¹¹ Despite growing economic and political cooperation, decision-makers in Tehran know that competition over regional clout will test Turkish–Iranian ties in the long run. Thus, as the situation on the Arab street remains fluid, Iran is preparing itself for the possibility that the balance of its competition and collaboration vis-à-vis Turkey may tilt toward the former.¹²

Ankara and Tehran both seek to become the preeminent arbiter in the region, and stylistic differences in their respective soft-power strategies are clear to each side. In contrast to Iran's approach of exploiting popular frustration over regional injustices and engaging political proxies, Turkey employs trade, investment, and a consistent emphasis on diplomacy and international integration. Privately, Iranian officials acknowledge that Ankara's soft-power strategy is more appealing in the long term: it serves Turkish national interests by securing new markets for the country's growing economy without compromising the Islamic sentiment of the ruling Justice and Development Party's political base; and it provides Turkish decision-makers with greater flexibility to use backroom or megaphone diplomacy, depending on the circumstance, in support of the current push for peaceful democratic transition.¹³

Post-war Iraq provides a compelling example of the growing competition between Iran and Turkey for regional influence. Policymakers and pundits in the West regularly refer to Iran as the big winner of the Iraq war. Overthrowing Saddam Hussein has removed a historical barrier to Iran's regional ambitions and all but guaranteed a Shiite-dominated and Iran-friendly government in Baghdad. It has also given Tehran a freer hand in the region and created a lucrative market for Iranian goods. Less noticed are the near-identical geopolitical benefits that Turkey has gained since the American invasion. Turkey's significant political, economic, and cultural influence have steadily increased in Iraq, as it rebalanced its strategic approach and maneuvered to fill the power vacuum created by the U.S.¹⁴ Unlike Iran, however, Turkey has been able to increase its influence in Iraq—and by extension work against the U.S.–Israeli–Saudi status quo—without the burden of historical mistrust (the Iran–Iraq War), international hostility (sanctions, the nuclear impasse), or democracy deficits (Turkey's democratic model versus Iran's model of militaristic theocracy).

Unsurprisingly, Iranian decision-makers have been somewhat irritated by Ankara's ability to 'hijack' the anti-status quo mantle of change. In addition to Turkey's more balanced projection of soft power, Erdoğan's public criticisms of Israel—and concrete Turkish efforts to put Israel on the defensive—have won the Turks strong admiration on the Arab street. One observer in Tehran quipped to one of the authors that Iran had done all the groundwork "in the resistance against Israel," and at the last

minute the Turks stole the show. Turkey's comprehensive soft power in the region, including cultural affinity, economic ties, and a balanced approach toward Israel, may present Iran with a major challenge in any future competition for leadership in the region.¹⁵ Insofar as Turkey's new assertive foreign policy continues to challenge the U.S.–Israeli–Saudi vertex in the long run, Iran will feel the uniqueness of its regional position—and its source of soft power—to be increasingly at risk.

Nevertheless, although Turkey's brand of Islamic democracy and its 'zero problems' regional policies provide an appealing model for many Arabs, Tehran is not entirely convinced that Ankara's soft-power strategy is transferable beyond the short to medium term. Turkey may be limited to solutions that play to its strengths (diplomacy, business) rather than competing in the spheres of its rivals in the U.S., Israel, Saudi Arabia (military superiority, maintaining the status quo) or Iran (political proxies, championing the disenfranchised). It is also open to accusations of hypocrisy. Turkey was one of the first countries to call for Mubarak's resignation, but it urged dialogue and restraint in dealing with a recalcitrant Muammar Gadhafi. It remains to be seen how perceived Turkish double standards will play on the Arab street. But Iran sees a Turkish rival that will face the increasingly difficult challenge of balancing its interests with its values—a challenge not entirely different from the paradigm that has seemingly trapped the Islamic Republic's U.S.–Israeli–Saudi rival.

Arab Beacon, Arab Wild Card

As Iran jockey for regional preeminence, Egypt will become a new geopolitical battlefield for its soft-power projection. Widely regarded as the beacon of the Arab world, Egypt is also the wild card that can potentially tip the scales in favor of any one of these three aspiring regional hegemon. It is already being pulled in three very different directions. Egyptians took an important step toward democracy with the toppling of Mubarak, but many daunting challenges remain—not least of which is the fact that each of the key Egyptian leaders serving in the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces was a high-level member of the Mubarak regime.¹⁶ A transition to democracy through free and fair elections has been promised, but concerns linger regarding the timing of elections and the demonstrably non-democratic behavior exhibited by the council on issues including freedom of the press and freedom of assembly. Precisely because Egypt's revolution remains unfinished, and domestic stability in the short to medium term is unlikely, Iranian decision-makers see an opportunity to exert regional influence while capitalizing on Egypt's inward orientation.

Following Mubarak's downfall, the Egyptian government went from 'bulwark of the regional status quo' to 'foreign policy unknown' almost overnight. That alone has created new challenges for the U.S.–Israel–Saudi vertex, each of which Tehran readily

appreciates. Once the trio's most staunch regional partner, Egypt is now transitioning in such a way that its inward focus does not allow for the diplomatic bandwidth to comprehensively address the myriad issues it faces; and the shifting trajectory of post-revolution Egypt does not track entirely with Egypt's Mubarak-era foreign policy preferences. In an effort to keep any future Egyptian government as a close ally, the U.S. has pledged more than \$2 billion in debt relief and investment assistance in addition to the mammoth yearly aid package of approximately \$1.5 billion.¹⁷ The Saudi government had also provided the Mubarak regime with a steady flow of aid. After Mubarak's overthrow, the House of Saud announced a \$4 billion aid package for Egypt—a not-so-subtle reminder to the Mubarak-era officials still in power that patronage is readily available, and that it can be withdrawn just as easily as it is offered if future Egyptian policies stray too far from the status quo.¹⁸ For its part, the Supreme Council has pledged to honor all regional and international obligations and treaties (read: Egypt's peace treaty with Israel). Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu welcomed this announcement. Thus, it may seem that Egypt has changed leaders rather than policies.

Nonetheless, Iran views various decisions made by the post-Mubarak government as unprecedented and in its favor. Opening the Rafah crossing into the Gaza Strip, allowing Iranian warships to pass through the Suez Canal, and gradual progress toward upgrading Iran–Egypt relations to the ambassadorial level are three notable policy shifts in less than a year that, if nothing else, demonstrate a strengthening of Iran's position. The Islamic Republic benefits from any degree of independence in Egyptian foreign policy: after three decades of friction, Iranian–Egyptian relations can only improve and the actual degree to which they improve is less important; moreover, despite Egypt's status as the beacon of the Arab world, its current instability prevents it from exercising its full influence in the region. As Egypt recalibrates, Iran revels in the fact that yet another country in the region is unlikely to conform to U.S.–Israel–Saudi efforts to contain it.

Taking a page from its rivals' playbooks, Turkey is trying to split the difference between monetary and political support for post-Mubarak Egypt. Iran believes that Turkish policymakers are both worried about the economic repercussions that widespread regional unrest can cause and confident about the opportunity to enhance their regional influence. While Turkey's peaceful approach to resolving regional unrest is genuine, decision-makers in Tehran also see Ankara's strategy as politically and economically expedient. For Turkey's impressive economic growth to persist—and Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party to remain popular at home—regional unrest and conflict must abate to maintain an environment conducive to low political and economic risk. If instability intensifies and oil prices rise above \$100 a barrel, Turkey's economy might suffer as foreign and domestic investors move their money to safer

locations. To that end, Iranian decision-makers see their Turkish counterparts trying to balance interests and values as part of a longer-term strategy. The Iranians themselves are not overly concerned with Ankara's efforts in the near term, given Tehran's cautious and reactive approach and its dependence on the limitations of others.

The Devil You Know

Where Iran's soft-power strategy runs into trouble is in Syria, as the mass protests there are shaking the stability of Iran's closest regional ally. The theocratic Islamic Republic of Iran maintains an alliance with secular, socialist, Baathist Syria that has lasted decades. There is perhaps no better demonstration of Iranian readiness to sacrifice ideology in favor of more practical strategic interests. Iran sees its relations with Syria as a marriage of convenience with a fellow authoritarian country that is willing to assume steep political and economic costs to maintain domestic control and independence from foreign powers. To that end, as the Syrian government faces an unprecedented uprising, it has used brute force in an effort to scare protesters into submission, not unlike the Iranian government's strategy in suppressing protests that followed Iran's contested 2009 presidential election. In the context of Tehran's geopolitical rivalry, the case of Syria reveals a strong measure of Iranian hypocrisy—and realpolitik.

Prior to the Arab Spring, Tehran watched as the U.S.–Israeli–Saudi vertex forged a cold peace with Damascus over the five years following Syria's 2005 withdrawal from Lebanon. There were significant changes after Obama took office: America slowly engaged the Syrian government and reinstated its ambassador in Damascus; Israel participated in Turkish-mediated peace talks with Syria, only to have Syria withdraw to protest Israel's 2008–2009 bombardment of Gaza; and Saudi Arabia repaired its strained relationship with Syria, in an effort to ensure that differences over Iran and Lebanon did not impede cooperation in Iraq, Yemen, and elsewhere in the region.

In the wake of regional unrest, however, Tehran is now seeing notable shifts in each actor's strategy. Washington has all but abandoned its efforts to engage the Syrian government, with Obama saying in no uncertain terms: "President [Bashar] Assad now has a choice: he can lead that transition [to democracy], or get out of the way."¹⁹ Accusations of hypocrisy have been heard at home and abroad due to America's comparative silence toward Saudi-supported repression in Bahrain—with Tehran leading the charge. Iran sees Israeli and Saudi decision-makers, however, working against a democratic transition in Syria. They would prefer the Al-Assad government to remain in power for separate reasons predicated on realpolitik and have reportedly used their leverage behind the scenes to prevent more forceful U.S. intervention.

The Islamic Republic believes that Israel and Saudi Arabia prefer the devil they know and can control: a Syrian government that understands the Israeli rules of the

game when it comes to the Golan Heights and cold peace, and the Saudi rules pertaining to the kingdom's interests in Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq. The Iranian view is that Israel and Saudi Arabia prefer to maintain the current regional order because regime change in Syria is too risky and would likely fuel international pressure for America to intervene elsewhere in the Arab world. Both have made it clear that they oppose the Arab Spring and prefer efforts to crush it rather than pushing the U.S. into a policy it has sought to avoid from the outset.

Iran's own hypocrisy when it comes to Syria has rendered it difficult for the Islamic Republic to fully capitalize on American, Israeli, and Saudi policies toward the Arab Spring. The U.S. has been at the forefront crying foul, even accusing Iran of aiding Syrian government repression.²⁰ On this point, Obama did not mince his words: "And this speaks to the hypocrisy of the Iranian regime, which says it stands for the rights of protesters abroad, yet represses its own people at home. Let's remember that the first peaceful protests in the region were in the streets of Tehran."²¹ The post-election protests in Iran served as an unexpected precursor to the Arab Spring, because they highlighted the indifference of regimes throughout the region to the long-standing political, economic, and social aspirations of the people. Just as *realpolitik* has determined Iran's response to uprisings across the region, political realism limits Iran's ability to win hearts and minds on an Arab Street that seeks an end to the authoritarian governments that the Iranian regime itself resembles in many respects.

At best, Iran sees an opportunity to maintain a semblance of the status quo in its alliance with Syria: together they stand a better chance to survive and achieve their long-term goals. Syria wants to regain the Golan Heights from Israel and maintain its influence in Lebanese politics, both goals that are aided by Iranian support for Hamas and Hezbollah, who maintain instability on Israel's flanks and increase the costs of Israel's occupation. In return, Syria aids the Islamic Republic's quest to assume preeminence in the Persian Gulf by helping to neutralize Israeli capabilities and American encroachment. Any change in Syria's government increases the likelihood that Damascus will adopt regional policies more in line with its Arab brethren, such as support for Sunni political forces in Iraq. It could also lead to Syria becoming a full-fledged Saudi client. That could strip Iran of its strongest Arab ally, and a notable element of leverage it holds over regional rivals. The Islamic Republic would prefer to see a weakened Al-Assad regime remain in power; such a scenario hedges against Damascus swinging toward the U.S. and increases Syrian dependence on Iranian support.

For decision-makers in Tehran, there is perhaps no greater threat to the stability of their Syrian alliance than Turkey. While the U.S.-Israeli-Saudi vertex is limited in its capacity to influence events on the ground in Syria, Iran sees neighboring

Turkey as uniquely able to leverage the Al-Assad regime's strategic calculus—and being increasingly willing to do so. Prior to the Arab Spring, Syria epitomized Turkey's 'zero problems' foreign policy in the region. Political cooperation between the neighboring countries facilitated substantial trade relations, including the construction of infrastructure to cement long-term connectivity. Nevertheless, after months of shuttle diplomacy, Ankara's efforts to utilize its soft power in Syria (and Libya) have been unable to foster a non-violent compromise solution. Now, Tehran sees a heavy expenditure of political capital—and inevitable accusations of hypocrisy—taking a toll on Turkish decision-makers, and causing them to shift from soft to hard power strategies. Just as Turkey eventually came to support NATO intervention in Libya, the Erdoğan government has recalibrated the balance of its interests and values in a shift away from the Al-Assad regime. To that end, Ankara has publicly pronounced its willingness to take in Syrian government defectors, deliver relief aid to protesters inside Syria, and consider a military-enforced humanitarian buffer zone on the Syrian side of the border.²² Herein lie the limitations of Tehran's strategy: as Turkey prepares to take the aforementioned steps to shift the region's balance of power, Iran's cautious and reactive approach and its increasing economic dependence on Ankara restrict it from taking countermeasures.

Raising the Stakes

While Iran has longed for the post-American era in the Middle East, this moment has paradoxically presented a more arduous challenge than Tehran anticipated. Despite showing significant ideological flexibility in the past, Iran knows that its ability to adjust to new realities over the long term is limited. A more democratic Middle East would highlight Iran's own political, economic, and social shortcomings; a more autocratic region would continue using Shiite Iran as a pretext for its own domestic crackdowns.

In the short to medium term, however, regional unrest puts Iran's adversaries on the defensive and plays to one of Iran's demonstrated strengths: the ability to exploit instability and division. After revolution, eight years of war with Iraq and international isolation, the Iranian government has an inclination for managed disorder that tends to hamstring its rivals. Complications in Syria notwithstanding, Iran is seeking to leverage new working relationships with the Arab street that capitalize on both the declining U.S.–Israeli–Saudi status quo and Turkey's newfound balancing act.

Iran's geopolitical strategy—to consolidate the Islamic Republic as a regional power undaunted by Western objections—has received a boost from the challenges facing its rivals. It has improved ties with Egypt and managed its working relationships with most others in the Muslim world, even if Saudi Arabia and Bahrain remain fearful of Shiite power. Iran's nuclear program continues to make slow but steady progress,

and its recent satellite launch demonstrated its missile capabilities. Iran shows no sign of yielding to the West's pressure-based approach to relations. It has no incentive to yield. Instead, decision-makers in Tehran are leveraging the Arab Spring to reduce pressure. For example, by introducing two preconditions to its nuclear talks with the West—lifting sanctions and acknowledging Iran's right to enrich uranium—Iran has raised the stakes. The West is now faced with confrontation at a level that it does not have the ability to address easily, particularly at a time of widespread regional unrest. To that end, the Islamic Republic has increased flexibility in its quest for regional influence.

For Iran, winning the Arab street—and by extension, regional dominance—will require a projection of soft power that advances aspirations for political, economic, and social freedoms. Real-time developments in Egypt and Syria provide compelling opportunities that Iran would do well to seize. Decision-makers in Tehran think that the U.S.–Israeli–Saudi vertex still lacks the ability to adapt to fast-paced transition but maintains enough military and economic clout to decelerate changes that many nevertheless consider inevitable. Iran acknowledges that Turkey possesses a more compelling political and economic model for the Arab street, but it is betting (precari-ously) on Ankara's status as an emerging power to force it to balance—and in more complex scenarios choose between—interests and values. The Islamic Republic's strategy is reactive in nature and predicated on patience, largely because its ability to be proactive is limited. Because the primary concern for decision-makers in Tehran is regime survival, they fear the unpredictable consequences of proactive decision-making at home and abroad. Iran's own internal problems and paralysis among domestic political elites reinforce its reactive posture. It displays less foresight than cognizance. Nevertheless, Iran knows that success for its regional strategy does not require the same level of certitude or stability as it does for its rivals, and it therefore stands to benefit most from continued popular unrest. In the foreseeable future, this is arguably the most likely scenario.

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