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Tour d'horizon: An Iranian optic on the  
Middle East and its prospects

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Almost a year ago, in a well-remembered Friday prayer sermon delivered on February 4, 2011, Ayatollah Khamenei spoke at length, in Arabic, about the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. At the time, the Egyptian people were on the streets attempting to topple the Western-backed dictator, Hosni Mubarak. In his sermon, after praising the Tunisian people, Ayatollah Khamenei spoke of how Mubarak had humiliated Egypt by becoming an American pawn and an ally of Israel. He also recalled the sharp pain that Egyptians felt when Mubarak helped implement the Western-imposed, inhuman siege of Gaza and when his regime worked in partnership with Israel and the United States during the 22-day onslaught against women, men, and children there in late 2008.

Ayatollah Khamenei went on to speak about the history and intellectual traditions that have given Egypt its unparalleled importance in the Arab world. In this context, he described the movement unfolding in Egypt as both Islamic and freedom-seeking, with its potential for significant impact on the Middle East. Noting that the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt had parallels to Iran's revolution more than three decades ago, he also underscored that the situations are not all identical; each is unique, in accordance with different geographical, historical, political, and cultural conditions. Claims that Iran is seeking to export its ideology or model of government to Egypt, he said, were dishonest attempts to keep the peoples of the region divided. He went on to warn that the United States has recognized it cannot keep its pawns in power, so it will attempt to "move its pawns around" to preserve its hegemony and should not be trusted.<sup>1</sup>

Sharp criticisms were leveled at Ayatollah Khamenei's sermon in the West and by parts of the Arab media. Commentators attacked the idea that these movements constituted an "Islamic Awakening", claiming they had nothing to do with religion. It was an "Arab Spring", they intoned; the revolutionaries were looking to establish secular liberal democracies, not embrace "theocratic" rule. However, as time went by, it became clear that the Western political establishment, the Western media, and most Western "experts"—who had not anticipated the coming revolutions in the first place—were once again incapable of correctly understanding the situation in Egypt or correctly interpreting the broader region's realities. Hence, their dismay with the results from the first round of the parliamentary elections in Egypt, in which the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice coalition and the Salafist Nour coalition together received over two thirds of the votes, despite the fact that voting mostly took place in areas not normally considered to be religious strongholds.<sup>2</sup> It is already apparent how the parliament that will emerge from these elections is likely to steer the process of drafting a new constitution for Egypt—if it is allowed to do so by the country's U.S.-backed military.

The Western (or Western-affiliated) Middle East "experts", who were previously so adamant that these revolutions were secular in nature, now wonder how to read unfolding events. Some are putting on a brave face, expressing hope that, after a few years, Islamic parties will fail and people will vote for Western-oriented liberal parties—as if people in the region do not remember who backed and continues to back Arab dictatorships. They do not seem to recognize that the social and economic crisis currently taking place throughout Europe and the United States has already raised serious questions about the nature and future of liberal capitalism, especially in the Middle East and other non-Western parts of the world.

Western elites' difficulties in understanding the Middle East are exacerbated because their sources of information in the region are basically local secular elites—wealthy, Western-educated, and even Western-oriented Muslim intellectuals. Westerners collectively fail to recognize that such people are simply not representative of their societies. As in Iran, the large majority of Egyptians are religious. If past experience in Iran is something to go by, the Muslim Brotherhood will probably at some point split into two or more separate parties, which will then provide competing interpretations of how society should be run. Hence, religious parties will probably be the dominant forces in Egyptian politics for many years to come—not just for one or two electoral cycles.

Indeed, if the Muslim Brotherhood does not meet popular expectations in the coming months and years, it is the Salafists who are likely to capitalize on this to expand their own influence over Egypt, not Western-style, secular liberals. The Salafists' strong electoral performance and substantial external funding positions them to declare, in the not-so-distant future, that it is time for "true Islam" to save the country. This is something that Western countries should be deeply concerned about, as the ideologies of these Salafist groups have a great deal in common with those of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Of course, Americans and Europeans cannot complain about the Salafists' religious intolerance or their externally-backed rise to power, because they are heavily financed by the West's closest regional allies. For reasons largely linked to self-preservation, Saudi Arabia and other Arab dictatorships in the Persian Gulf region are financing such extremist groups all over the Arab World and beyond. Over the past three decades

they have radically affected societies in significant parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan, creating a culture of intolerance and radically altering the local culture.

In sum—and notwithstanding the scorn directed at Ayatollah Khamenei’s observations a year ago—this is looking very much like the manifestation of an Islamic Awakening. Many factors such as injustice, social inequality, despotism, and western domination contributed to the recent events, but they do not at all contradict the idea of an awakening. For those who kept their eyes open, there were clear signs of this from the prevalence of Islamic slogans as well as the role of mosques and Friday prayers. Significantly, the term “Islamic Awakening” has been used by Ayatollah Khamenei in his public statements as leader nearly two hundred times over the past two decades.<sup>3</sup> He has repeatedly stated that Islamic movements are on the rise and that the region is heading for major changes that are, for the most part, in sharp conflict with Western interests.

Unlike in the West, the Iranian leadership, along with others in the region, has expected these events for many years and is thus much better prepared than Europe and the United States to deal with this reality.<sup>4</sup> The Islamic Republic is rapidly expanding relations with rising political entities throughout the region. It recently held the First International Islamic Awakening Conference, with over seven hundred participants from a host of key regional movements. In the Conference’s Inaugural speech, Ayatollah Khamenei told attendees what he believed to be the principles and slogans of the revolutions: independence, freedom, the demand for justice, opposing despotism and colonialism, the rejection of ethnic, racial, or religious discrimination, and the explicit rejection of Zionism. All of these, he said, are Islamic values, based on the Qur’an.<sup>5</sup>

In the eyes of many Iranians, these extraordinary changes in the Middle East and North Africa—alongside America’s forced withdrawal from Iraq, its inevitable defeat in Afghanistan, the sharp social and economic decline in the West, and the rise of new international players such as China, India, Brazil, Russia, and South Africa—will ultimately lead to a rapid decrease of American and European influence, regionally and globally.

From an Iranian perspective, this provides at least a partial explanation why the United States and the EU are now so explicit in their (so far unsuccessful) attempts to inflict severe pain on ordinary Iranians through “crippling” sanctions.<sup>6</sup> While, in the past, it was clear that the objective of sanctions was to make average Iranians suffer—as the Wikileaks cables confirm<sup>7</sup>—there was at least a hypocritical attempt to portray these actions as humane and directed at the government. Now, the incessant and shrill calls to assassinate and murder Iranian scientists, military officials, and politicians and to launch military strikes on the country reveals the existence of a disturbed mentality among many of the political elite in the West and in the United States in particular. The recent flurry of absurd accusations made against Iran by the US, such as the so-called plot against the Saudi Ambassador to Washington,<sup>8</sup> the rehashed IAEA report presented by a deeply biased director general,<sup>9</sup> cyber attacks, and the attempts to impose sanctions on the Iranian central bank which politicians like Ron Paul consider to be an act of war,<sup>10</sup> is also leading many in Iran to conclude that the United States is currently too irrational for any form of meaningful dialogue.

The Russian Foreign Ministry noted that the IAEA report “had a set goal to deliver a guilty verdict”,<sup>11</sup> despite the fact that, as Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister elsewhere pointed out, there is absolutely no evidence whatsoever to show that Iran’s nuclear program is anything but peaceful.<sup>12</sup> That is why, contrary to the dominant narrative in the Western media, the majority of the “international community”,<sup>13</sup> such as the 120 Non-Aligned Movement states, have consistently backed the Islamic Republic’s position on its nuclear program.<sup>14</sup>

Iranians well remember the American government’s duplicity when President Lula attempted to find a diplomatic solution to the refueling of the Tehran Research Reactor. The reactor, which each year produces medical isotopes for hundreds of thousands of dying cancer patients, was running out of nuclear fuel. Western governments were preventing it from being refueled in order to put pressure on Iran, effectively playing with innocent lives.<sup>15</sup> In April 2010, Obama sent official letters to the Brazilian president and the Turkish Prime Minister stating the conditions that would have to be met for the United States to accept an agreement. When the conditions were met and Lula, Ahmadinejad, and Erdogan signed the Tehran Declaration, Obama shocked the three leaders by immediately rejecting it and pushing for a new UN Security Council resolution to increase sanctions against Iran. Not only did Obama lie to the Brazilian and Turkish leaders and publicly humiliate them, but it later became clear that his letters to them had been intentionally written to mislead both Brazil and Turkey.<sup>16</sup>

It did not take long for history to repeat itself. In July 2001 the Russians put forth a new “step by step” proposal to resolve the nuclear issue. Senior Russian officials informed their Iranian counterparts that the proposal has the support of the United States and subsequently, despite reservations, the Iranians agreed in principle with the plan.<sup>17</sup> It later became clear to the Iranians that the Americans had misled the Russians too and that they did not actually accept the Russian proposal.<sup>18</sup> American actions make it reasonable for Iranians to conclude that the actual US objective is for the nuclear issue not to be resolved and that the real problem for the United States is Iran’s opposition to and resistance against American hegemony. Contrary to claims made in the west, Obama has never seriously attempted to engage with the Iranians on the basis of mutual respect.<sup>19</sup>

The irony is not lost upon Iranians that they have had to experience four rounds of sanctions, even though they have never produced Weapons of Mass Destruction. Yet the countries that have actually pushed for the sanctions—meaning the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany—actually helped provide Saddam Hussain with WMDs to use against Iranian civilians and combatants, as well as against the Iraqi people. In other words, these countries were deeply implicated in crimes against humanity; they compounded their complicity by preventing the UN Security Council from even declaring that Iraq had used such weapons, much less condemning it. Iran on the other hand, despite its capability, refused to produce or use such weapons. In fact, the Islamic Republic has, to this day, never produced chemical weapons, because it considers them inhumane. As war veterans and civilian casualties in Iran continue to die because of the WMDs provided to the former Iraqi regime by the West, it is an understatement to say that Iranians are angered by these governments’ continued attempt to strangle the Iranian economy.

More recently, the extraordinary capture of the unmanned American stealth plane by the Iranian armed forces, not only reveals the extent of Iranian military competence; it also exposes the extent of US hostility towards Iran as well as its sheer disregard of international law, including Afghan sovereignty.<sup>20</sup> What is the point of talking with the United States, Iranian's ask themselves, when it carried out such provocative acts of hostility with such total unaccountability and impunity?

Many in Iran feel that, to a large extent, the Syrian public has also been made the target of sanctions and foreign intervention because of the West's extraordinary hatred towards the Islamic Republic. In other words, Syrians must cease to earn a living, because their government, alongside Iran, stands in opposition to the Israeli regime's apartheid policies. From almost the start of the troubles in Syria, Iranians were aware that external forces were involved, notwithstanding repeated denials by Arab regimes in the Persian Gulf, Turkey, and Western countries. As time passed, this has become even clearer, despite unending media propaganda<sup>21</sup> claiming that it is simply a struggle between unarmed street protestors and the Syrian army and intelligence services.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the dictatorships of the Arab League are even having problems forcing their own monitors in Syria to tow the official line and now even a poll funded by Qatar, whose results have clearly been spun and completely ignored by the western media, reveals that the majority of Syrians actually support President Bashar Assad.<sup>23</sup>

There is no doubt that the foreign anti-Syrian alliance is, responsible for arming groups, for the devastating car and suicide bombings, and, thus, for the many deaths—including the large number of sectarian murders, largely ignored in the Western media—that have occurred as a result. When American officials and the western media speak of Syrian brutality and constantly repeat unsubstantiated casualty figures presented by western funded Syrian NGOs<sup>24</sup>, it would be good for them to recall how many tens, if not hundreds of thousands of innocent people in Iraq were killed during the insurgency against US occupation. The regular killing of civilians in Afghanistan and the regular drone attacks in Pakistan among other countries are, of course, ongoing tragedies.

Iran believed that the Syrian president should have been given a chance to carry out the reforms which were promised, but that from the start, Western governments and Arab dictatorships were adamant that reforms should not succeed under President Bashar Assad. Hence, they attempted to overrun the legitimate internal opposition with an external one that backs Western military intervention.<sup>25</sup> While the Islamic Republic was critical of the treatment of peaceful protestors with legitimate grievances by Syrian security forces, Iranians knew that, unlike other Arab regimes, President Assad had and continues to have significant popular support. His stance against the Israeli regime, his support for resistance groups, and the fact that unlike other Arab leaders he lives a relatively normal lifestyle, gives him much more street credibility than Saudi, Jordanian, Bahraini, Yemeni, or Egyptian rulers.<sup>26</sup> On multiple occasions in recent months, enormous crowds have taken to the streets in simultaneous pro-Assad demonstrations in major Syrian cities; in contrast, none of the Arab dictators—including his current antagonists—have ever been able to muster such public support for themselves. Indeed, Iran believes that this is the main reason why cruel sanctions have been imposed on Syria: they are meant to do nothing but hurt the general public and cause discontent among the population. President Assad's foreign adversaries recognize that he has significant popular support; hence, the Syrian people must be punished until this support is diminished.

As in Gaza and Iran, the goal is to punish people for backing political forces critical of the West. In the 1980s the United States had success with such a policy, as they removed the Sandinistas from power in Nicaragua by making life unbearable for ordinary people through sanctions and a bloody insurgency. While Iranians recognize that international law has been unfairly constructed to favor western powers, the increasing Western, Turkish, Saudi, and Qatari disregard for Syrian sovereignty—and even for their own UN Security Council resolution on Libya—is creating a strong sense of lawlessness and chaos. Add to this, of course, the regular and arrogant violation of Iranian sovereignty through drones and “crippling” sanctions as well as active support for anti-Iranian terrorist organization.

In an extraordinary Wall Street Journal interview, the pro-Western Syrian National Council’s spokesman, Burhan Ghalioun, revealed clearly where things stand. He effectively said that if the Syrian state is overthrown, the new regime would relinquish the Resistance against Israel and would move politically towards the “principal Arab powers”, meaning the current Arab dictatorships.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, while there is no doubt that the Syrian government has major deficiencies and that excessive force has been used by army soldiers and security service members, leading to the deaths of innocent people, Iranians do not believe that the US, EU, Qatari and Saudi led attempts for regime change in Damascus are being carried out for the sake of freedom or democracy. If only for self-preservation, these absolute monarchies will, with the aid of their Western backers, try to deter any meaningful move towards democracy near their borders, at all costs. Hence, the continued US support for the Jordanian king, the Egyptian military,<sup>28</sup> the Yemeni regime, the Saudi occupation of Bahrain, and the Al-Khalifa dictatorship.<sup>29</sup> The United States has a policy of deterring democracy in the region, so why should anyone believe, they have a sincere interest in freedom for Syrians?

There is evidence indicating the United States has been viewing sectarianism as a potential tool for weakening its adversaries for quite some time now.<sup>30</sup> This fits well with the current situation in Syria. The fact that Turkey, which seems to be showing Neo-Ottoman tendencies, has allowed Abdulhakim Belhadj (who was close to both the al-Qaeda leadership and the Taleban) to meet with leaders of the so called “Free Syrian Army” in Istanbul and on the border with Turkey is mind boggling.<sup>31</sup> In addition, Salafi clerics close to the insurgency repeatedly incite religious, racial, and sectarian violence, such as the well-known Saudi cleric Saleh Al-Luhaidan, who said a third of the Syrian population should be killed so that the rest could live.<sup>32</sup> The foreign-backed extremists even murdered the son of the Syria’s Grand Sunni Mufti,<sup>33</sup> just as their allies killed many Sunni clerics and sheikhs in the Anbar province in Iraq.

Whether the Syrian regime survives in its current form, reforms itself, or falls is not really the central issue—though in Tehran it is widely believed that President Assad will survive this crisis and most probably remain in power. What is striking is how the Americans and Europeans simply do not learn from history. One would imagine that, after the September 11 attacks, they would have learned a thing or two about blowback. If extremist ideologies in Afghanistan and Pakistan, funded by the Saudis and other oil-rich Arab regimes, can create such immense difficulties for Western countries, imagine the problem when their sphere of influence reaches North Africa, India, Nigeria, Central Asia, and Turkey.

In any case, despite American attempts to preserve the old order, the region is rapidly changing. This has enormous implications for the Islamic Republic, the United States, and Israel. There is no doubt that future political orders in Egypt and Tunisia will, to say the least, be highly critical of Zionism. It is even possible to imagine the rise of radically different political orders in the future in countries like Jordan. Iran will no longer be an isolated voice in its opposition to Israeli apartheid. This alone will be a major breakthrough for the Islamic Republic, since it will significantly decrease Western pressure on the country. Ongoing events in Yemen also have the potential to help bring about major change in the Persian Gulf region, especially after the role that the United States, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and others have played to preserve the current regime. In the midst of all this, oil-rich countries to the north of the Islamic Republic are also beginning to show signs of instability.

It is important to note that, contrary to Western propaganda, no Iranian leader has at any point advocated the dismantling of Israel through military annihilation. Despite the often willful distortion of the Iranian president's words in the Western media, the Islamic Republic's position has consistently been that Israel, like apartheid South Africa, is a colonial entity entitling a particular group of "chosen people" exceptional rights while denying those rights to the majority of the native population, thereby leaving the regime without any legitimacy. Iran's stance against Israel is based on what it sees to be an important moral principle.<sup>34</sup> The Islamic Republic followed the same principle in its opposition to apartheid South Africa, at a time when Western countries backed the regime. From the Iranian perspective, the only way for the Palestinian issue to be resolved is for the Zionist ideology to be relinquished, so that Muslims, Christians, and Jews can live as equals in the land of Palestine. If the Palestinian people as a whole, including refugees, come to an agreement with Israel, the Islamic Republic would respect the Palestinian decision and refrain from interference. Nevertheless, on moral grounds it will not recognize the Israeli regime as legitimate. Of course, the extremist ideologies promoted by wealthy Arab dictatorships have a very different view of religious diversity and coexistence.

The claim that the Islamic Republic is somehow a military threat is not only dishonest, but the reverse of reality. The United States and Israel, along with other Western countries have repeatedly made military threats against the Iranian people, while the Iranians have never made threats of their own. Of course, Iranians believe that an attack on Iran is unlikely, because even senior American leaders admit that the consequences would be highly detrimental to the United States and its interests.<sup>35</sup> However, the mere threats themselves are seen as inhuman and irrational; because of such American behavior, Iran has prepared itself for any potential American miscalculation. Ayatollah Khamenei recently stated that, while Iran will never carry out aggression, from now on the Islamic Republic will respond to threats with threats.<sup>36</sup> Iranians firmly believe that stability or instability from the Mediterranean to the borders of India is inextricably linked to peace and stability in the Persian Gulf region. A look at a map makes clear that Iran has the ability to respond to threats throughout the region and beyond. If there is no security for Iranians or for Iranian oil exports, then, in Iranian eyes, there will be no security for Iran's antagonists in the region.<sup>37</sup> Under such conditions, the United States and its allies should not expect oil or gas to flow out of the Persian Gulf, northern Iraq, or Central Asia. It would be a grave mistake to underestimate the

Islamic Republic's military power and resolve as well as the region's popular response to yet another western act of aggression in a very unstable region.

Hence, it is in the interest of the declining Western powers to take a more rational approach towards regional issues and a more reasonable approach towards the Islamic Republic. Any attempt to hurt or humiliate Iranians will simply harden Iran's stance and have an opposite effect, whereas reason and respect can lead to a solution acceptable to all sides. As things stand; however, the Islamic Republic has no option but to make conditions more difficult for the United States and its allies in the Persian Gulf region.

It is also in the interest of those so-called "Iran experts" in Western countries who consistently distort reality inside Iran to behave more responsibly.<sup>38</sup> Their constant caricature of Iranian society as well as their unfounded claims of fraud in the 2009 presidential elections,<sup>39</sup> have largely served the interests of unwise advocates of confrontation within the United States who need to "delegitimize" the Islamic Republic in the eyes of the American public. Iranians know quite well that a country engaged in perpetual war—where even establishment figures such as Helen Thomas, Rick Sanchez, and Octavia Nasr are silenced, where academics are denied tenure for their political views,<sup>40</sup> where people are imprisoned for making television channels like Al-Manar available to the public,<sup>41</sup> and where innocent citizens are regularly harassed by the FBI and IRS or arrested on trumped-up charges, simply because they are anti-war, anti-Wall Street or because of their sympathy for Palestinians, Lebanon, or Iran<sup>42</sup>—has little right to speak about Iran. Those who do so anyway should at least have the decency to wait until the last Iranian gas victim dies.

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The opinions in this paper are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of Conflicts Forum.

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