The Islamic Awakening and Transformation of the United States Policy towards Iran

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Abstract

U.S. policy towards under Obama administration has been driven by geopolitical considerations; therefore, bilateral relations between Tehran and Washington have been dependent upon geopolitical competitions. The Islamic Awakening in the Middle East and North Africa has left lasting imprints on the geopolitics of the region and on the nature and domain of Iran-U.S. competition. The most noticeable characteristic of this phenomenon was that ordinary people turned into the main actors on the political scene. This previously absent factor caused a change in the geopolitics of the region. In fact, the Islamic Awakening has shifted the balance of power in the internal politics of regional countries in favor of the Islamic Republic of Iran and to the detriment of U.S. allies. As a result, in the midst of regional revolutionary developments, the United States found Iran to be one of its most potent rivals and took measures in order to counter the Iranian influence. These counter-Iranian measures were set as to manage and control the Islamic Awakening. This article explores the impact of the Islamic Awakening on U.S. policy towards Iran. This paper argues that Washington perception of the region, following its failure to predict and manage the upheaval, led to the evolution of US strategy which resulted in intensification of aggressive policies directed towards Tehran. These policies were implemented in order to utilize newly recognized regional opportunities while depicting the Islamic Revolution as an inefficient model to follow for Arab states. This strategic approach was manifested in the form of crippling sanctions.

Keywords: Islamic Awakening, Arab Spring, Nuclear, Sanction, Iran, America

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Introduction

A study of the United States policy demonstrates that influencing Iran has been a constant dilemma for American presidents. After a period of unrealistic understanding, different US presidents have changed their initial approach towards Iran in hopes of better results. Over the past three decades, the United States has had three main strategic considerations in regards to the Islamic Republic.

First, the strategic aim of any confrontation with Iran, has been directed to either overthrow the regime or change the country's revolutionary behavior and identity. Second, exhausting Iran's regional power and diminishing its capacities, prevent the country from exercising its geopolitical leverages against the United States. Third, opening a direct diplomatic channel in Tehran in order to understand and influence social realities and trends. The outcome has been so that the United States has pursued policies that undermine the development of strategic advantages against Washington.

As a result of former President George W. Bush's costly policies, President Obama took it upon himself to reduce U.S. geopolitical vulnerabilities in the region as soon as he came to office. First of all, Obama attempted to put an end to the Iraq war and shift the U.S. concentration from Iraq to Afghanistan to change the condition of the war in this country for the U.S. This was achieved by increasing the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, stabilizing U.S. situation in Afghan affairs, and lastly, changing the United States mission in Afghanistan before the end of his first term. Well aware of America's tarnished image in the Muslim World, Obama attempted to

re-organize U.S. relations with the Muslim populations through the "New Begining" policy, based on mutual respect and interests. Public diplomacy was deemed as the most efficient tool to carry out this mission, pursued through dialogue and visits to Islamic countries including: Turkey, Egypt and Indonesia. Through proposals of diplomatic interaction with Iran, the U.S. president endeavored to absorb the Iranian resistance and revolutionary-based discourse. This was at a time of unprecedented Iranian power gain due to "Axis of Resistance" victories in the 33 and 22-day wars. However, American proposals regarding interaction with Iran were contingent upon Iran "opening its fist". This phrase implied that Iran set aside its means of acquiring power in the region, including the "Axis of Resistance" by which it had obtained considerable popularity in the Arab world. Therefore, acknowledging and struggling to diminish Iran's regional power was the main focus of Obama's plan to manage Middle East developments, including those of Iran. This is while Washington was actively working towards a strategic isolation of Iran on both the regional and international level using policies such as: independent interaction with Syria, peace talks with the Assad government and distancing Moscow from Tehran through policies of engagement with Russia. During this era which lasted until the end of 2010, the United States continued to introduce Iran as a threat in the region, and while doing so, strengthen the military capabilities of its own Persian Gulf Arab allies through enhancing their conventional military capabilities by selling them new weapons and missile defense systems. Furthermore, the United States strengthened deterrence against Tehran by stationing missile defense systems in Europe aimed at Iran. However, with the start of the Islamic Awakening, U.S. calculations inevitably underwent a major change in respect to Iran and its role in the region.

A) The American Understanding of the Middle East after the Islamic Awakening: Prior to the beginning of the Islamic Awakening studies in regards to Middle East order and political

developments were mainly conducted based upon Realist theories. Such theories were able to assess regional developments in accordance to the role of states and their interactions with one another. On this basis, political calculations in the Middle East were mainly seen through the "balance of power" outlook and military capabilities of the states. With this approach, the internal stability of the regimes and the structure of their political systems were not considered as significant or even relevant in strategic calculations. However, the Islamic Awakening prioritized the internal environment of states in intergovernmental relations. The most important features of the Middle East as the U.S. understands are as follows:

1. People: The Main Actors: The most important outcome of the regional revolutions in 2011 was the transformation of people into major, active actors in the political scene. In fact, over the course of these revolutions, we witnessed a presence of masses encompassing more than the urban middle class. Before this, the realist perspective placed an emphasis on the role of states when analyzing developments in the Middle East. However, this issue affected all strategic equations in the region. In his most important speech about the region's developments, delivered in the United States Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Barack Obama, addressed the mass presence of the people as "populism" and expressed his fear about it. He stated that:

"A region undergoing profound change will lead to populism in which millions of people –– not just one or two leaders -- must believe a policy is possible." He continued by saying "for decades, the United States has pursued a set of core interests in the region: countering terrorism and stopping the spread of nuclear weapons; securing the free flow of commerce and safe-guarding the security of the region; standing up for Israel's security and pursuing Arab-Israeli peace. Yet, we must acknowledge that a strategy based solely upon the narrow pursuit of these interests will not fill an empty stomach or allow someone to speak their mind. Moreover, failure to speak to the

broader aspirations of ordinary people will only feed the suspicion that has festered for years that the United States pursues its interests at their expense." (Obama, May 19, 2011). In another speech, Hillary Clinton, considered siding with people as being on the right side of history (Clinton, November 7, 2011). Over time and with further settling of the dust of developments, belief in the role of people changed into something more than mere diplomatic gestures. In line with this, one United States intelligence assessment in 2012, released by the U.S. army intelligence service stressed that "competition over winning people's minds and their convincing is the defining factor for the newly established governments in North Africa or in the current conflicts in Syria and Yemen" (DIA, 2012: 11-12).

Moreover, the popular nature of these movements made it impossible for the U.S. to foresee the Middle East revolutions and predict their spillover into other countries. It was made near impossible for the U.S. intelligence system to collect information about the internal social trends, particularly the situation of dissident groups, due to their reliance on formal sources (Ignatius, 2011). The head of the U.S. Senate Committee on Intelligence stated that the intelligence services did not forecast and manage the developments in the Arab world; she further stated that the CIA's information about the revolutions in Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and Libya has been nothing more than those stated by official newspapers (Miller, 2011; Rogin, 2011). As a result of this information deficit, the U.S. administration took contradictory positions with respect to developments in the Arab world and was subject to serious criticisms. This has driven U.S. policy to side with popular currents and refrain from opposing them. In this respect, President Obama has said "there is a lot of change that will take place in the Middle East over the next decade. And wherever we see the impulses of a people to move away from conflict, violence, and towards diplomatic resolution of conflicts, we should be ready and prepared to engage them (Obama, December 7, 2013).

2. Uncertainty: The Main Characteristic of the Region: One of the most significant consequences of the increasing role people are playing in regional developments is the uncertainty and unpredictability of future developments. Although foreign forces did not engineer social movements in the region, the new post-revolution governments are not representative of their people just yet; therefore, developments have gained more significance than the results themselves. An understanding of the developments that value process over results is evident in the viewpoint of Washington. Michèle Flournoy, U.S. Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, in Obama's first term believes that: "Most recent events of the Arab Awakening have to be seen as the first chapter in what is going to be a very long book. This story is likely to unfold over decades, if not generations, so we have to take a long view, a strategic view, and do so in the face of extraordinary complexity and profound uncertainty" (Flournoy, 2012, 13).

The United States Office Director of National Intelligence explored the impact of the Islamic Awakening on U.S. interests including: the intensification of the anti-Americanism, murder of the U.S. diplomats in Libya, and increase in the number of territories that have separated themselves from the control of central governments, concluding that: "Although there have been moves towards democratic governance, the majority of countries are experiencing uncertainty, violence and political stagnation. Collapse of the leaders and weakening of the regimes has led to religious and ethnical rivalries. Over the next upcoming years, Islamist actors are extracting the most electoral interests from this political opening and will undoubtedly stabilize their situation in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco. Governments in transition are dependent, to considerable degrees, on their ability to incorporate these actors into national politics and marginalize political, military, clan and commerce groups that were previously incorporated with fallen regimes. In the meantime, transitions that fail to satisfy public demands for change will most

probably cause revival of unrests and inclination towards authoritarian or extremist solutions (Clapper, 2013, 14)."

Such understandings have led to the replacement of the term "Arab Spring" with "Arab Awakening". Obama went as far as to liken these developments to a "convulsion" across the region (Obama, September, 2013). This feeling of uncertainty brought about confusion for the United States in defining a role for itself. This ultimately translated into a lack of unified strategy regarding regional developments and led to a case-by-case reaction towards each development. Such response, led to dissatisfaction amongst the different internal groups in countries undergoing change. As Obama addressed this issue, "the United States is chastised for meddling in the region, accused of having a hand in all manner of conspiracy; at the same time, the United States is blamed for failing to do enough to solve the region's problems and for showing indifference toward suffering Muslim populations… America has been attacked by all sides of this internal conflict, simultaneously accused of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, and engineering their removal of power." (Obama, 24 September 2013). In fact the condition of uncertainty has increased both the limitations on US power projection and critiques on US foreign policy behavior. Overall it indicates the US weakness in managing post- Islamic Awakening Middle Eastern affairs, something that is evident in different US doctrines including 'light footprint' and 'leading from behind' and the strategy of "pivot to Asia".

3. Inefficiency of the Existing Defense Pattern and the Conventional Tools: Since Obama took office in 2009, Washington has tried to reduce the number of its battlefields in the Middle East while simultaneously containing Iran's influence and giving security assurance to its allies using a new pattern that includes conventional and non-conventional elements against Iran. Mentioned elements include: creation and strengthening of the regional missile defense system and incorporation of its radar into the Israeli defense system, military modernization and extensive sale of conventional weapons to

Arab states such as the sixty billion dollars sales of modern weapons to Saudi Arabia, as well as creating a global alliance to counter Iran's conventional power through sanctioning export of weapons to Iran (UNSCR 1929, June 9, 2010: Para. 8). Other elements include: qualitative increase of conventional weapons of destructive power, showing political will for stationing nuclear tactical and strategic weapons in the region, and assuring Israeli strategic supremacy in the Middle East (Shapiro, July 16, 2010). Therefore, the United States government attempted to strengthen the anti-Iranian regional order through conventional and non-conventional weaponry tools such as posing Iran as a nuclear threat within the framework of negative security assurance (Department of Defense, 2010). However, US defense and the Islamic Awakening discredited military arrangements in the region. Prior to the Islamic Awakening, threats were conceived as originating from Iran; however, they were later attributed to local street protests. One of the most important outcomes of this realization was the fact that instruments such as war were seen as a disadvantage. (Lynch, 2011).

4. The Discursive Challenge for the United States: While Washington was busy with tactical measures to cope with the massive waves of the Islamic Awakening, the Islamic Republic of Iran took initiative for a strategic game. This was the beginning of a three-stage discourse posed by the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution. The first stage is concerned with defining Islam as the basis of regional developments and Islamism as the ideal of this popular movement. The second stage deals with the geographical orientation of the revolutions and considers them trans-regional with their impacts spreading to the heart of Europe and America (Ayatollah Khamenei, May 4, 2011). This was before the start of the Occupy Wall Street Movement. According to this discourse, Europe and America were seen as links in the chain of regional revolutions and despite the attempts of the West to prevent the expansion of revolutions throughout the Middle East, this wave spread to the west.

In the third stage, this discourse linked the Middle East revolutions to the Wall Street Occupation Movement by recognizing anti-Zionism as their common characteristic (Jamshidi, 2012).

Hosni Mubarak was still in power while the Egyptian revolution was still in its early stages and all the while, the United States harbored hope for his regime's survival. During a collection of speeches, Friday prayer sermons and international seminars, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution named the fledgling movements an "Islamic Awakening". According to him, these revolutions have powerful Islamic structures, are anti-American and anti-Israeli, and have a direct connection to the Islamic Revolution of Iran. The Supreme Leader stressed that one of the most inspiring factors for these Arab revolutions is the sustainability of the Iranian political system following the Islamic Revolution. With this, he regarded Islam as the driving force for these revolutions and Islamism as their ideal.

On the other hand, from the American viewpoint, these revolutions were rooted in poverty and the inefficiency and despotism of Arab governments. From this American perspective, religion had no role in the creation of these revolutions and no relation to foreign policy, particularly relations with the United States and Israel. On a final note, geographical boundaries played no role in these models and assigning them as a Middle Eastern one was inaccurate. Thus, the United States stood against the Islamic Republic's discourse and we bore witness to a bipolar discourse concerning the region's revolutions: "Islamic Awakening" or "Arab Spring"? Thereafter, Washington tried to weaken the Islamic discourse through a diverse range of measures such as artificial model building and damaging the Islamic Revolution model.

B) The Islamic Awakening and Transformation of the United States Policy towards Iran: Over the past three decades, recent events such as the Islamic Awakening and past events such as the empowerment of the Islamic Republic have posed a strategic threat to the United States. Obama expressed this feeling of threat in

his May 2011 speech in the State Department entitled "Populism Triumph over Regional Politics". In order to hinder Iran's strategic opportunities, Washington took a number of steps to make sure the country heeds with caution and distances itself with the revolutionary events taking place. Efforts aimed at spreading the uprisings to Iran, repeated accusations against the Quds Force and utmost intensification of sanctions were among measures taken by the United States to tarnish Iran's regional image among the peoples all in an effort to prevent the Islamic Republic from becoming an acceptable political model.

1. Pressuring Iran into an Isolationist State: The United States of America and its allies sought to create unrest in Eastern Iran. The reason for this action was to redirect Iranian resources and utilize it at their will in foreign policy. Leon Panetta the American Secretary of Defense said that an Arab Spring-like revolution in Iran is only a matter of time, "I think we saw in evidence of that in the last election in Iran that there was a movement within Iran that raised those very same concerns that we're seeing elsewhere... And I think in many ways, it's a matter of time before that kind of change and reform and revolution occurs in Iran as well... We should try to take every step to try to support their effort but at the same time, we've got to analyze each situation to make sure that we do nothing that creates a backlash or that undermines those efforts...I think the reform movement in Iran is learning one hell of a lot from what's happened in Tunisia and Egypt and Libya and Syria. One of the issues we were looking at when Tunisia and Egypt happened is what sparked this? What made this all happen? Listing factors including social media and populations of youth who lacked hope for the future. The fact is when people decide that the moment has come, that's a moment when tremendous change is about to happen. And I think it's true, not only in the Middle East. It's going to be true in Iran as well" (Panetta, September 6, 2011).

Amos Yadlin the former Israeli Army intelligence chief stressed

in his speech at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) that "perhaps the greatest opportunity of the current developments is spread of the Jasmine Revolution to Iran." (Yadlin, May 30, 2011). Hillary Clinton the former U.S. Secretary of State pointed to a Libyan model for Iran in imposition of sanctions by saying: "I think if those incidents (after 2009 election) reoccurs, it would be wiser if the Green Movement or any other movement inside Iran says that we want the voices of the world, we want the support of the world behind us. This is what the Libyan opposition did. When they began their struggle against Qadhafi, and it seemed like such a hopeless uphill climb, they, from the very beginning said we want all the support we can get from the outside world. We want our Arab brothers, we want the region, and we want the United Nations, and we want everybody to help us".

At the same time, U.S. officials used offensive rhetoric to address the Islamic Republic while simultaneously supporting the 2009 post-election riots. In his first and most important speech concerning Middle Eastern developments, Obama supported the riots and uprisings and attacked the Islamic Republic by saying, "Let's remember that the first peaceful protests in the region were in the streets of Tehran, where the government brutalized women and men, and threw innocent people into jail. We still hear the chants echo from the rooftops of Tehran. The image of a young woman dying in the streets is still seared in our memory. And we will continue to insist that the Iranian people deserve their universal rights, and the government does not smother their aspirations" (Obama, 19 May 2011). Clinton also described the Iranian officials' stances in supporting the protesters in Arab countries as an "ironic hypocrisy". Obama also accused Iran of insincerity in dealing with popular protests in the region on the grounds that the Islamic Republic officials claim supporting the protesters rights in the countries of the region while threaten their own citizens by using violence (Obama, May 22, 2011). Interestingly enough, slogans from the so-called

Green Movement asked the U.S. for cease of cooperation with the Axis of Resistance. In this manner, the United States looked for signs of internal unrest and the spread of regional upheavals to Iran, as well as, political conflicts among Iranian officials.

2. Damaging Iranian Regional Image: One of Washington's top priorities in order to manage regional developments were to discredit the Iranian government to prevent the people from using the Iranian model as an appropriate one. To realize such objectives, the United States used different tactics including:

Artificial Model-Building: Following the Islamic Awakening, finding proper models to shape barely established governments turned into one of the most important concerns for the citizens of those countries. With respect to the active involvement of Tehran in discourse-building and defining basic characteristics of each Islamic movement, Washington was also obliged to introduce models and in fact embark on "artificial model-building" for the region's revolutions. In continuation with the east European revolutions, the United States began to take initiative by introducing the Tunisian revolution as a color revolution (Jasmine revolution). However, as the situation continued to develop, starting from Egypt and later enveloping the entire region, the White House assigned the National Security with the task of conducting thorough research on revolutions that had occurred over the past few decades. The criterion for these revolutions was very specific: it had to be against a military dictator who had been a long term supporter of the U.S. Research was not limited to a particular geographical context and covered all revolutions: from Latin America to Europe and East Asia. Among all reviewed case studies, Indonesia was accepted by Obama, in which U.S.-backed Suharto was deposed from power by revolt (Solomon, February 12, 2011; Ladler, May 28, 2011). Over time, Washington introduced more models to inspire the Middle East. In his late 2011 visit to east Europe, Obama introduced the Polish Youth Consolidation, which had overthrown communists using peaceful

tactics as an inspirational model for the Arab Spring; he reasoned that the Polish revolution had spread to the Middle East through cultural exchange with Tunisians (Obama, May 28, 2011).

Discrediting the Islamic Revolution Model and Regional Position: Despite numerous United States intelligence assessments having stated that it is possible to engage in dialogue with the Islamic Republic as a rational actor, Washington continued to attack the Islamic Republic and its identity basis; the strategic aim of these attacks was to invalidate the Islamic Republic of Iran as a model for revolutionary countries. Tom Donilon, the United States National Security Advisor delivered detailed speeches attempting to discredit all economic, political, social and identity dimensions of the Islamic Republic political system going so far as to liken the government structure to that of terrorist Al-Qaeda. In one of his speeches, he stated "The Iranian model like the Al-Qaeda one is of no credit for our time. It cannot be any more remote from the Arab Spring beliefs and aspirations … So it is no surprise that the Iranian worldview has no similarity to the ongoing movements in Tunis, Cairo, Benghazi and Daraa streets." (Donilon, May 12, 2011). In interview with the Egyptian Nile state channel, Hillary Clinton, called the Iranian revolution a hijacked one and invited the Arab peoples including the Egyptian and Tunisians to take cues from that. Clinton regarded Egypt the best example to rebuke the Iranian model. She said that the Iranian revolution has denied its people their rights and freedoms, which is not what Egypt is looking for (Clinton, March 16, 2011).

Accusation in Assassination Conspiracy on Saudi Arabian Ambassador: Following a number of passive reactions and as the first active attempt to confront the Islamic Republic in the context of the Islamic Awakening, Washington declared that an individual from the Quds Force had made an attempt on the life of the Saudi Arabian ambassador. This baseless accusation was immediately subject to numerous criticisms. Regardless, the United States presented a non-binding statement in the United Nations General Assembly against

Iran. Whilst this baseless accusation was dismissed, it revealed the intention of damaging and discrediting the regional repute of the Quds force- seen as one of the most powerful arms of Iran's regional power. This reality is best reflected in the efforts of the United States Congress in judicial prosecution against and approval of the assassination of Quds Force military personnel. This may be reflected in the Homeland Security Committee session of the United States Congress, in which two former government official experts suggested the assassination of Major General Ghasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force. Less than a month later, on November 22, 2011, the chief of the same committee wrote a letter to Obama, asking for clandestine operations against the Quds Force facilities and physical elimination of its personnel, cyber operations against Iran, granting support to the sedition current and sanctioning the Iranian Central Bank. In December 31, 2011, Obama signed the article to impose sanctions on the Iranian Central Bank within the National Defense Authorization Act of 2012 (NDAA).

By doing so, Washington attempted to damage the Islamic Revolution of Iran as a suitable model by creating substitute models for the ongoing revolutions. Such measures came with great media propaganda against the Islamic Republic and its role in the region. Through the framework of this bipolar discourse, Tehran offered a positive model through an active approach; whilst, the United States merely negated all productive propositions. Differences in the depth of meaning and signifiers of the two key words of "Islamic Awakening" and "Arab Spring" are well expressive of how contradictory the Iranian and the U.S. models actually are.

3. Intensification of Pressures and Maximization of Sanctions: The United States had concluded assessments about the relation between Iran, the region and United States interests during the developments related to the Islamic Awakening. These assessments are as follows:

1. Although Iran has not generated the developments taking

place in the region, it has a genuine ability to impact and utilize them in order to increase its power and advance its interests. Robert Gates, the United States Secretary of Defense said "we have no evidence that suggested that Iran started any of these popular revolutions or demonstrations across the region. But there is clear evidence that as the process is protracted, particularly in Bahrain, the Iranians look for ways to exploit it and create problems" (Gates, March 12, 2011).

2. Military intervention or threat of using force in any manner would only lead to the expansion of Iranian regional power, therefore damaging Western interests in the Middle East. A good example of this is the Iran – U.S. confrontation over the Hormuz strait and the Iranian announcement to use military force in order to "wisely manage" the area. Well understanding the scope of Iranian capability, speaking at the annual conference of the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), Obama criticized the "loose talks of war" of those who call for war with Iran, described it as "harmful to the U.S. interests and to the advantage of Iran" (Obama, March 4, 2012). Gates, the former U.S. Secretary of Defense expressed similar ideas, though more vocally, he said "Bombing Iran leads to creation of several Jihadi generations with whom our children have to fight on U.S. soil" (Blair, May 1, 2009).

3. Following the Islamic Revolution, Iran interprets the developments of the region in line with its own interests, discourse, and foreign policy. These developments have strengthened Iran's political will in pursuit of its regional goals. Moreover, the Islamic Awakening has led to a shift in the balance of internal politics for those powerful regional countries, uniting Iranian allies against despotic rulers supported by the United States.

4. A brief overview of United States interaction with Middle Eastern countries clearly demonstrates that strategic reconciliation with the West is not in the interest of those countries, as it does not guarantee the longevity of their political systems. The Libyan war proved that Qadafi's nuclear deal with the West only eliminated the

obstacles for the United States and its allies' military attack on Libya. If Libya had maintained some degree of military readiness, it could not have been this easily attacked by NATO countries (Kissinger and Baker, 2012).

The result was that the U.S. adopted policies guaranteeing an increase in pressures against Iran whilst avoiding military confrontation. However, in practice, the U.S. refrained from a balanced pursuit of diplomacy and pressure; there was a mere intensification of pressures without actually working on negotiation track. U.S. recalculations were rooted in a shift of understanding about how Iran's strategic calculations are shaped. The United States has been pursuing changes in the Iranian leaders' strategic calculations regarding the nuclear power agenda. Studying Washington's stance reveals that the people of Iranian society are the main targets of United States policy.

The United States acquired its desired result by redirecting the pressures of sanctions against the people, resulting in a reaction against the government. This stems from the idea that as far as there is a balance between pressure and interaction both are doomed to failure (Pollack & Takey, 2011). Two factors played a role in this regard: first, the misunderstanding regarding Iranian officials mindset and second the cost-benefit model based on this understanding that the gradual imposition of pressure would lead to Iranian concession. This is while, according to Tehran, the United States cannot keep the international coalition together forever and, at one point or another, the pressures on Iran will subside and sanctions will be completely removed or become ineffective. In other words, with Iranian nuclear resistance persists, the international community will lose its interest in continuation of sanctions against Iran before the sanctions can bring Iran to its knees (EINHORN, July 10, 2013). The second factor is related to the geopolitical developments in the region and the occurrence of the Islamic Awakening in the Middle East, which made the United States reach the conclusion that the unrests in the Arab

world should not lead to diversion from the Iranian subject especially in such circumstances when Iran can be the real winner of these developments. So the pressure on Iran has to continue and quite possibly intensified. In this way, maintenance of the balance between pressure and interaction would only lead to the failure of U.S. policy towards Iran, therefore it is necessary to increase pressure and keep Iran in the corner.

The first step to increase pressure on Iran was taken by the International Atomic Energy Agency report in November 2011. This report included, for the first time, a number of reports and news sent from different countries. The information and news, which were prepared by intelligence services, accused Iran of carrying out activities to acquire a nuclear weapon. However, none of the news and information offered credible evidence for their allegations. Nevertheless, Yukiya Amano, the Director General of the IAEA called them "overall credible". This occurred while Iran was still engaged in technical negotiations with the IAEA. This report had the potential to push for changes in the U.S. policy against Iran and increase pressures on Tehran (Ambinder, 2011).

On the last day of 2011, the United States President signed the NDAA through which the foreign financial institutions that engaged in financial interactions with Iran beyond what is considered "legal" by U.S. law, will be fined and sanctioned. Such sanctions included, among other things, cut or limiting of access to bank accounts in the United States. More importantly, this act targeted the Iranian oil exports and started a new phase of sanctions against Iran. The law has two fundamental aims: first to isolate Iran's Central Bank from the world financial system; and second to increase the pressures on the government using this reality that the Central Bank is the primary means of receiving the oil money. However, this act called for significant, but gradual decrease in purchasing Iranian oil. The gradual decrease was mainly due to: possible shocks, sudden increase in oil prices, and even military confrontations in the region after an abrupt

cut in purchase of Iranian oil.

The Main Buyers of Iranian Oil and the Amount of Purchase Reduction (Million Barrels Per Day)

Country	Average 2011	End of 2012	Half average 2013
EU (particularly Italy, Spain and Greece)	600000	Little and ignorable	Little and ignorable
China	550000	400000	435000
Japan	325000	200000	180000
India	320000	280000	225000
South Korea	230000	200000	165000
Turkey	200000	150000	140000
South Africa	80000	0	0
Malaysia	55000	30000	15000
Seri Lanka	35000	20000	15000
Taiwan	35000	20000	15000
Singapore	20000	15000	15000
Others	55000	25000	35000
Total	2.5 mbd	1.34 mbd	1,24 bmd

(Katzman, January 7, 2013: 41 & June 13, 2013: 20)

By imposing sanctions on the Central Bank, Iranian oil revenues dropped to half in 2012, the price of foreign currency tripled (compared to the previous year), and the government faced a serious budget deficit (Katzman, 2013, 3). The government's budget deficit and increase in the price of foreign currency led to a decrease in production, sharp increase in consumer prices, decline in purchasing power, and the suffering of the Iranian people. U.S. officials considered these as the initial signs of economic crisis. The U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, welcomed the monthly decrease in Iran's oil revenues several times (Clinton, November 17, 2012) and Joe Biden the United States Vice President said, about the impact of sanctions, "Remember I said it here, and it will be well before the election so you can judge me, sanctions will have a devastating impact on the Iranian economy and force them to think even harder" (Biden, May 8, 2012). The successful results of imposing sanctions on the Central Bank of Iran and the oil encouraged the U.S. congress and the President to expand the sanctions to other sectors of Iranian economy. Therefore, the United States applied punitive measures against the Iranian banks and their partners, blocked Iranian oil

revenues, intensified the sanctions regime through presidential executive orders and expanded the sanctions on energy and shipping industries.

A year after the Islamic Awakening, the United States administration changed the level, domain, and type of sanctions to maximize pressures on Iran:

1. Change in the level: from multilateral to unilateral,
2. Change in the domain: from territorial to extra-territorial,
3. Change in the type: from smart to crippling.

Changing the mode of sanctions from smart to crippling means targeting people instead of state institutions related to the nuclear program. Smart sanctions are selective pressures against target groups and individuals aimed at avoiding creation of difficulties for the public and the economy. These sanctions are more reflected in blocking the individuals' assets, ban in travel, arms embargos, and sales of some particular goods related to the nuclear program. To the contrary, the crippling sanctions target energy industry, oil and gas exports and their products, the banking sector including the Central Bank, shipping, insurance and transportation, auto-industry, and other basic industries in the two public and private sectors. These are all aimed at paralyzing the whole Iranian economy and commerce and people's daily lives. In fact, damage to the people is not collateral damage; the people are real targets of sanctions (Khajepour, Marashi, Parsi, 2013, 10). Many international organizations and institutions criticize the pressure of sanctions on people's lives and general economy. Ban Ki-Moon the Secretary General of the United Nations calls such sanctions inhuman measures. He further stresses that "the sanctions imposed to the Islamic Republic have had considerable impact on the people's lives including the increase in inflation, rise in consumer goods prices, energy expenses, rise of unemployment and shortage of necessary medicines" (Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, 2012: para. 42-43). It is clear that the increase in pressure against the people and encouraging social mobilization against the

political system was an attempt to spread the Arab Spring to Iran.

Conclusion

The phrase "Arab Spring" was coined by the US as soon the initial signs of Middle Eastern changes and developments were seen. The United States understanding of the Middle East was altered after the Islamic Awakening. The core of this understanding is that the region is undergoing a transitional phase, which is: disorderly, chaotic, and violent. The United States could not predict the occurrence and orientation of the developments, and was also unable to keep up with the speed of these developments. As President Obama has confessed, "The initial Arab Spring has transformed into regional convulsion". Such popular revolutions bundled with the internal economic crisis, austerity plans and the tensions between the Congress and the administration, undermined country's management capability. Three years after the Islamic Awakening began, the Obama administration has posed no constructive idea or initiative to manage it. It is obvious that the United States has no positive strategy regarding the Islamic Awakening and considers the region's developments gradual and time-dependent. For the United States, there is no solution but to try to manage and control the threats emanated from the Islamic Awakening and developing Middle East region. Subsequent to the Iran-Iraq, 33 and 22-day wars, the Islamic Republic of Iran has emerged as a powerful regional influencer, thus, the main concern of the United States has been preventing the country from ascending to regional hegemon status. Considering the internal and regional restrictions of the U.S., a military option was costly and would only add to instability in the Middle East. This strategic matrix directed the United States to adopt a more invasive policy towards Iran, concentrating on the pressure option and pursuit of a policy of intensified sanctions with the ultimate aim of containing Iran through economic means.

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