

Iran and Democracy Promotion in the Middle East

Farshad Roomi *

Abstract

Democratic governments tend to cooperate with each other positively. By establishing a framework, democracy controls politicians' political behavior, preventing them from pursuing imbalanced and improper policies. Popular revolutions in the Middle East have overthrown a number of authoritarian regimes allied with the United States. With the independent democratic governments being formed, we see Iran's regional and transregional rivals and adversaries challenged. Making efforts to promote democracy in the Middle East can serve as an important factor in strengthening Iran's influence in the region. Therefore, given that the rule of the game in the Middle East is one of zero-sum, the Islamic Republic of Iran should reinforce its national security level and enlarge its national security realm by explicitly supporting and articulating the demands of the regional nations. Also, the presence of the Shi'a in government is closely related to the promotion of democratic trends, support for the democracy-seeking wave in the Middle East.

Keywords: Middle East, Islamic Awakening, Democratic Peace, Iran

* Assistant Professor of Economics and Social Sciences, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz (farshadroomi@yahoo.com)
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Introduction

In the late 1980s, domestic economic problems along with the domino effect of democratization in other places made governments in certain Muslim countries exert fewer pressures on dissidents, holding elections to gain legitimacy. Islamic activists were the first to take advantage of the new open space. In Jordan in November 1989, Islamic fundamentalists gained 36 seats in the 80-seat parliament. In Egypt, a number of candidates who were close to the Muslim Brotherhood were elected as members of parliament (Huntington, 1994: 337).

In Algeria, possessing a national organization and an efficient network of mosques and social welfare services, the Islamic Salvation Front (Front Islamique du Salut) emerged as the biggest Islamic group and one of the most powerful opposition parties. In the municipality elections in June 1990, which were the first multiparty elections since the country gained independence in 1962, the Front secured a landslide victory. Despite the arrest of Islamic Salvation Front leaders including Abbas Madani and Ali Belhadj and distribution of constituencies in favor of the National Liberation Front (Front de Liberation Nationale), the latter party failed to foil another landslide victory for the Islamic Salvation Front in the parliamentary elections. In the midst of jubilation among the Islamists in Algeria and throughout the Muslim World, the Algerian army suddenly intervened, arresting the Front's leaders, sending more than 10,000 people to desert camps and prisons, declaring the Front illegal and confiscating its assets (Esposito, 2001: 271). Ironically enough,



the Western states claiming democracy adopted largely ambivalent and vague positions towards the Algerian events. The electoral victory of the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria posed the question of the rise of an Islamic movement to power via elections, proving that the ballots created even more troubles for many world leaders than bullets did (Esposito, 2001: 272). In response to the question “Why did the authoritarian rulers carry out an election in which they were very likely to lose?” Huntington writes that the motivation was a need to renew their declining legitimacy at home, to comply with democratic standards which spread at the world and domestic levels, and to attract international respect and prestige (Huntington, 1994: 200).

Nonetheless, the past events have shown that the Arab states are essentially fearful of political reforms, because any serious change could lead to their collapse due to lack of popular support. The Arab states view the threat posed by the Islamist rise to power as the main obstacle to opening up the political space in their countries. Esposito argues that since they are aware of the Western fear of Islamic radicalism, the secular regimes in the Middle East take advantage of this in order to justify their suppression of the movements. These regimes encourage the fear of inflexible Islamic radicalism (Sisk, 2000: 31). By aggrandizing the threat posed by the Islamist rise to power and protracted conflict with Israel, the autocratic dependent Arab rulers ignored democratic rules and respect for the basic rights of their nations. Fareed Zakaria points to a meeting between an American mission and former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in which the American side discussed the issue of human rights, suggesting that the Egyptian government reduce pressure on political dissidents, expand freedom of the press and not to imprison intellectuals. Mubarak was agitated and said angrily: “If I do what you ask me to do, the Islamic fundamentalists will take over Egypt. Is that what you want?” (Zakaria: 2006: 140) The most outspoken Saudi spokesman Prince Bandar bin Sultan frequently points out to



American officials that if they put excessive pressures on the al-Saud government, its likely successor would not be a Jeffersonian democracy, but a Taliban-like theocracy (Zakaria, 2006: 141).

Regardless of the threat of Islamist rise to power, the Arab dictators benefit from conflict and confrontation with Israel in order to justify their unaccountable governance. Particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, the Arab-Israeli conflict was used to justify the militarization of the political realm in the Arab World and gigantic military expenditures in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Syria; a heritage that has persisted to date (Henry, 2006). In the past decades, this conflict has heavily affected politics in the Arab World, destroying transparency and accountability of political systems. Israel is an aggrandized excuse for most of the Arab World; a way for Arab governments to channel public attention away from their inadequacy (Zakaria, 2006: 179).

Most of the autocratic Arab rulers did not tolerate even superficial show-like controlled elections with the excuse of the Islamist rise to power and security conflict and problems with Israel, convincing political analysts that democracy will never be established in the Middle East. As Elis Goldberg and others have argued, "When democracy and the Middle East are used in a sentence, if not inconsistency, at least a deep suspicion is conveyed to the reader." John Waterbury also maintains that "The Middle East is a large exception in terms of resistance to political liberalization, respect for human rights and use of common democratic structures" (Bromlee, 2009: 114).

Nonetheless, along with the excuses used by the autocratic Arab rulers for obeying their nations' rights, the Arab societies have been urbanized rapidly within the past decades. At the same time, as the urban structures have gradually infiltrated the rural areas (including literacy, service jobs, communication means, telephone, satellite and even the Internet, etc.) the ratio of the young population in the Middle East surpasses any other region in the world. Since the Middle



Eastern societies have become more literate, more educated people are less willing to accept authoritarian rule. Therefore, the more the level of education increases the stronger momentum for the demand for democracy. The expansion of higher education and numerous universities has created a largely educated class, but this is unable to realize its high expectations and aspirations due to the irregular spread of the neo-liberal economic system.

Under such circumstances when extremist Arabism, Arab nationalism and socialist ideologies, which dominate the Arab mass society's mentality, lose their attraction, Islam is rising as a guiding political ideology. In a region where the people live in economic hardship as affected by modernity and are inheritors of persistent despotism and corruption and consequently hopelessness and social disorder, Islam is the harbinger of a new meaning and identity. In addition, Islam promises to respond clearly and convincingly to the widespread feeling of cultural, political and military humiliation, which is thought to be caused by the West, even when it accepts the attraction of Western-inspired democracy and adapts to it (Sisk, 2000: 17).

On the role of Islam in the developments of the Arab countries, Fareed Zakaria writes that the Arab World is a political desert; a territory without true political parties, free press, and little possibility for thinking differently. As a result, the mosque became a forum for political debates, since it is the only place in the Muslim societies that cannot be closed down, a place where all hatred of the government is accumulated and increases. The language of political opposition in these territories has become the language of religion. This combination of religion and politics flames rapidly (Zakaria, 2006: 170). On the other hand, Bernard Lewis regards the root of the recent protests in serious dissatisfaction and feeling of widespread injustice among the regional people, writing that the main conflict in the Arab and Muslim countries does not lie between freedom and despotism, but between justice and injustice. Assisted by the increasing use of modern media, people have become aware of their living conditions



and existing inequalities (Khoshroo, 2010). Within the past two or three years, social media and other communication means (such as Facebook, Twitter, cell phones and so on) have spread significantly among citizens, creating an unprecedented chance for political mobilization of individuals and political groups.

In the past, technology served to enhance power concentration and power hierarchy. However, the communication revolution of the current age has produced thousands of news outlets, which have made central control impossible and opposition and objection easy. The Internet has taken this process one big step forward. Thus, despite their rejection of ideational, social and political liberalism, the Islamists take advantage of the instruments of modernity – particularly mass media and democratic institutions – in order to offer a social and political platform. As Rachid al-Ghannouchi observes: “The means of violence would serve the rulers more than they serve the dissidents and militants” (Shadid, 2012).

Now, considering how the rules of the game in the Middle East and North Africa are generally that of zero-sum, this research seeks to answer the question “What impact will the spread of democracy and rise of democratic states to power have on Iran’s national interests?”, examining the effects of the Islamic Awakening on Iran’s regional and transregional rivals. The scope of this research includes the Islamic Republic of Iran and its adversaries, i.e. the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia. The research methodology, given the nature of the research, is analytical-descriptive in which efforts are made to answer the research question drawing upon the reactions and viewpoints of authorities and experts of these countries. Drawing upon Kant’s democratic peace theory and Karl Deutsch’s security communities theory as the conceptual framework, the hypothesis of the research will be: Support for the democratic wave in the Middle East and the rise of democratic governments can pave the way for Iran’s enhanced regional influence, contributing to the Islamic Republic of Iran’s national security level and securing of its national interests.



I- Conceptual Framework

Nowadays, democracy has become the standard form of government in the world. In most parts of the world, democracy is the only source of political legitimacy. Even authoritarian rulers such as Hosni Mubarak and Robert Mugabe held national elections with many efforts and hefty costs in which certainly they easily won. When the enemies of democracy take advantage of democratic slogans and implement its window-dressings, we learn that democracy has gained victory (Zakaria, 2006: 9). Aristotle considered democracy as a favorite form of governance because he believed that although individual persons lacked virtue, when they gathered, the collective judgment would be always better than one's judgment. If the formation of government is to secure and safeguard people's expedience, in that case, people would know better than any other authority what they want and what their expedience is, hence they are more adequate than any other authority to govern themselves (Bashiriye, 2009: 194).

In his democratic peace theory, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant argues that if citizens' consent is needed for decision-making on the necessity of declaring war (and it cannot be anything other than this in a democracy), the natural result will be that they will be very cautious in initiating such a humiliating game, considering all the catastrophe arising from war. Such a catastrophe includes the need to fight, need to pay the costs of war from their own pockets, need to reconstruct the ruins left by war and assuming the hefty load of national debts, which will make the taste of peace bitter, never susceptible to be paid off in the event of future wars. On the other hand, in a system which is not a republic, to declare a war is the easiest decision that can be taken. The ruler can make a decision on the declaration of war for the most trivial reasons without due diligence as if he makes a decision at a pleasurable party. Then, the invention of a justification for war, which is demanded by the rules



and principles, can be left with the corps of diplomats who are always ready to do it (Deville, 2008: 101).

According to this argument, it is less possible for democracies to engage in war with each other than for non-democratic governments, because the general public principally dislikes war and conflict, and if they are present in government, they will avoid war. Large and small wars tend to be initiated by autocratic arbitrary rulers and closed oligarchical governments (Bashiriyeh, 2008: 195). From this angle, authoritarian states are often viewed as irrational, unpredictable, and potentially dangerous.

Normative factors can also be mentioned in justifying the link between democracy and pacifism, meaning that states extend as much as to outside behavioral norms which have emerged within their territories characterizing their domestic political processes and institutions. However in non-democratic societies the government, as soon as it attracts the attention of the main legitimizing groups, is able to process its policy without attending to the public opinion or exhausting the proper political process (Maoz and Russet, 2008: 126).

Gaining help from the 'security community' theory, the future of the Middle East can be looked at along with the democratic states. In the security community theory that was first introduced by Karl Deutsch in 1957, three requirements are necessary for the formation of pluralist security communities: 1- Compatibility of major values relevant to decision-makers, 2- Mutual predictability of the behavior of decision-makers in units leading to integration, and 3- Responding to mutual needs. States must be able to respond quickly to each other's actions and messages without resorting to violence. In a pluralist security community, the member units would denounce war as a means to resolve disputes (Doherty & Pfaltzgraff, 2009: 672-673). Referring to the North Atlantic region, Deutsch regards the enlarged volume of transactions and relationships among the countries and the establishment of functional organizations as one of the basic conditions for integration, which enjoys crucial importance for the



formation of pluralist security communities (Doherty & Pfaltzgraff, 2009: 673). The United States-Canada and France-Germany after the Second World War are examples of pluralist security communities.

Thus, the formation of a security community in a region would demand the presence of democratic governments, because these are governments that tend to cooperate positively and are able to step in the direction of cooperation and integration and establishment of an efficient security community by developing social realities. Iran and other Middle Eastern nations will be able to create security in the region if they become able to communicate with each other. This linkage would create a forum for them to think together, see together and finally act together, therefore apart from material factors, the role of factors like identical understanding, doctrinal forces and effects arising from the identical normative environment also matters a lot (Kaykha, 2006).

Generally speaking, by establishing a framework, democracy controls the behavior of politicians and political parties, preventing politicians from pursuing imbalanced and improper policies. In the event of the adoption of improper policies, by securing a peaceful method for changing the government, democracy would reduce the economic and social costs of correcting improper policies, providing the grounds for increased long-term economic capacity. In fact, democracy is an efficient and low-cost system for systematic adjustment and correction of state policies in order to adapt them to popular demands and expectations.

II- The United States

The nature of the Middle Eastern states and their inability to establish and promote democracy is only part of the truth. In addition, the Western countries, and particularly the United States, have played a crucial part in consolidating corrupt regimes and expanding despotism in the region through their support for non-democratic states. U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War era stressed the



necessity of creating and promoting democracy in most parts of the world, yet this policy in the Middle East and North Africa revolved around stability and security. In this region, the United States tended to support the dictators, victimizing democracy to preserve stability and security. In order to justify this policy during the 1980s in academic circles, Islamic exceptionalism, incompatibility between the Islamic worldview and culture and democracy and historical tendency of Arab societies to despotism were often discussed.

With the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the end of the Cold War, the United States found a chance to revise its policies towards the region. The rise of radicalism and Islamic fundamentalism as significantly affected by the Iranian revolution had to be halted and areas that had gone beyond the system's control had to be brought back under the system's control. In the absence of a rival able to take benefit from the opportunities arising from political and social changes in the regional countries, the United States could embark on certain reforms in the regional social and political structure in order to reduce political and social discontent. Moreover, in the late 1980s, internal economic problems along with the universal impact of democratization in other parts of the world made governments in a number of Muslim countries exert less pressure on dissidents, holding new elections to renew their legitimacy. However, in every Arab country where a relatively free election has been held at the national or local level, Islamic groups opposing the West have been the winners.

Hence, from the viewpoint of Western leaders, democracy would increase the possibility that old reliable friends be replaced with more independent governments and unpredictable nations. This perspective creates a fear that these nations ensure Western access to oil less efficiently. Therefore, stability in the Middle East even after the Cold War has been often defined according to the status quo (Esposito, 2001: 276). An analyst and director of the Democracy Project in the Middle East, Shadi Hamid, in justifying U.S. dual



conduct, believes that U.S. policy towards the Middle East has been paralyzed with a dilemma called “The Islamist Dilemma” from a long time ago. In the past, the question of how the United States could contribute to democracy promotion in the region while avoiding the threat of Islamist rise to power was posed. But now it seems that the United States has no longer any chance for choice. Popular revolutions have overthrown U.S.-allied authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and so on. If democratic governments are created as a result of this awakening, the Islamist groups will be most likely to come to power (Hamid, 2011: 42).

The September 11th events ushered in change in the outlook of the international system towards how to implement domestic policies in regional countries and to offer a new prescription called the Greater Middle East Plan by the Western powers. It was perceived that since they do not meet the internationally accepted political norms such as human rights, democracy, freedom, etc., the despotic non-democratic states in the region enhance directly and indirectly the potentials leading to insecurity in the international environment (Afzali, 2006: 160). From the perspective of the Greater Middle East Plan, democracy and good governance would be a foundation on which development will be initiated. This is the same prerequisite most of the Greater Middle East countries lack. The level of political participation in regional governments is very low as compared to other world countries. In the Middle East, democracy, freedom and accountability are rare goods as women do not enjoy a favorable status, too. Therefore, encouraging democracy and good governance is a historical necessity for realizing political development (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2004: 478). On this basis, democratic consolidation, human rights and defending civil society will ultimately pave the way for adjustment or change in despotic states, as democratic states advocating human rights would secure the efficiency of the system and subsequently the security of the international environment (Afzali, 2006: 160).



Nonetheless, the strategy on Middle East democratization was faced in practice with conflicting necessities as some requirements of the so-called “War on Terror” contradicted democracy promotion in the Middle East. That is to say that some of the necessities in this war were at conflict with democracy promotion and American policy-makers were forced to choose one of the conflicting options. Indeed, the United States on the one hand is bound to further cooperate with the authoritarian Arab systems to fight al-Qaeda, providing the grounds for attracting their cooperation. On the other hand, evidence shows that these very systems have played a crucial role in providing the grounds for nurturing terrorism in their own societies. Hence in order to remove the roots of terrorism, these systems have to be replaced with systems elected by the people. For this reason, the concern unfolded in the United States that a rapid opening of political space in such closed systems as in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and even in Egypt would lead to further activation and mobilization of extremist groups in those countries and as such would backfire in the process of the “War on Terror.”

Therefore, in the period after September 11th 2001, U.S. security concerns and interests restricted the priority of support for democracy in those countries as they did in the past. In other words, it can be suggested that the course of events in recent years has moved in the direction of restricting the conceptual and practical sphere of the democracy promotion strategy in the Middle East and the goal of democracy promotion was severely restricted or undermined due to its conflict with other U.S. foreign policy interests and priorities (Mirtorabi, 2005). For this reason, we saw that with the start of the “War on Terror” after September 11th the Western powers that grant foreign aid have ignored the rules and principles more than they did in the past, seeking to gain the support of authoritarian regimes in the war against extremists by allocating financial aid (Diamond, 2009: 148).

American diplomat Richard Holbrooke commented on the



Yugoslav crisis in the 1990s: “Assume that election is free and fair and those who are elected are a group of racists, fascists and separatists. This is the complicated question. This problem is found anywhere in the world. For instance, consider the challenge we are faced with today in the Muslim World. We know that in these countries, which are all suppressive, there is a need for democracy. But what if democracy leads to an Islamic theocracy or something like that? This is not an illusionary concern” (Zakaria: 2006: 14).

Nevertheless, with the start of the Islamic Awakening, the United States is not in a position to choose and is forced to get along with political Islam. Although at the first place, Washington wants to know if the religious commitments of Islamists are compatible with respect for democracy, pluralism and women’s rights, what creates concern is the fear of the type of foreign policy that these groups might adopt. Unlike the autocratic governments allied with the West, Islamists have a distinct albeit vague agenda in the Arab World which is reliable, independent and willing to influence things beyond their borders. Undoubtedly democracy would make the region unpredictable and the democratic states will be less likely to follow U.S. security interests (Hamid, 2011: 42).

Thus, while American officials frequently speak of democracy and human rights, their conduct, in practice, is not generally in the direction of supporting democracy and human rights, because these dependent Arab regimes in the Middle East represent the best servants of U.S. interests, sell the bulk of their oil to the United States at a low price, have opened up their countries to American bases and have turned the Arab World into a large consumer of American products. For this reason, U.S. policy towards the recent regional developments has been paradoxical. The United States advocated regime change in Syria, Libya and finally in Egypt, but it generally defends the regimes in Yemen, and more notably in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia (Abdullah, 2010).

Americans already stipulated their position towards Bahrain so



that the Al Khalifah family would continue to easily suppress popular protests. Bahrain exemplifies the preponderance of material interest over American claims of advocating democracy and human rights. The presence of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, a Shi'a majority and neighborhood with Saudi Arabia all led Western eyes to close on the fate and human rights of the Bahraini people. In declaring support for these friendly regimes, one of the American presidents pointed to a politically important issue: "They may be bastards, but they are our bastards." Although commitment to democracy and human rights is not a new question, it has always had certain constraints subject to global or regional security and economic interests (Leftwich, 2003: 12). Hence the past and present performance of the United States demonstrates that its priority is not the establishment of democracy or human rights, but what matters is strategic benefits. From the Western perspective, the Arab rulers of the Middle East are authoritarian, corrupt and suppressive, but they are still more liberal, tolerant and pluralist than their possible successors (Zakaria, 2006: 141).

Western support for suppressive dictators has caused regional Arab nations' hatred and antipathy towards the United States and its European allies. It seems that U.S. national interests are not incompatible with the Islam of their main allies in the region (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Pakistan and so on), and if the Wahhabis, Salafists, the Taliban, and al-Qaeda can serve U.S. national interests – as Saudi Arabia has carried out this duty within the past decades – the U.S. government will not have any problem. There is no doubt that these types of Islam fundamentally contradict democracy, human rights, freedom, pluralism and critical rationality.

Experienced politician and former speaker of the Congress Thomas O'Neill considers the frustration of the Arab nations as a response to living under suppressive governments and living without enjoying the right to express political opinions; something for which they blame the United States due to its support for these governments (Zakaria, 2006: 183). Noam Chomsky maintains on the U.S. role in



the Middle East and Arab nations: “The United States and its allies never want the establishment of freedom and democracy for the Arab countries and the Middle East. The reason is simple, today most of the Middle Eastern and Arab peoples regard the United States as the main enemy of freedom and democracy, opposing their national interests” (Chomsky, 2011).

Rachid al-Ghannouchi criticizes the West for its failure to promote its democratic ideals. He suggests that while the West criticizes the Islamic governments for not being democratic, it supports the governments which are not democratic and preclude Islamic movements from developing their ideals (Esposito, 2001: 270). Therefore, those who seek democracy and advocate human rights should not expect too much from the U.S. government, because America’s agenda involves safeguarding national interests and such values as democracy, human rights, and justice will be pursued if they are consistent with U.S. national interests. Undoubtedly, the democratization of the Middle East will pose challenges to U.S. foreign policy in the region. The rise of the Islamic Middle East and Muslim attitudes to it will lead to Iran’s rising power as the major regional actor; a trend which would exactly contrast with the regional interests of the hegemonic system and its regional proxies. The fact is that the United States due to its past performance, unconditional support for Israel and support for dictatorships and need to gain their help in its “War on Terror” in the region does not possess necessary prestige in the Middle Eastern public opinion enabling it to easily play the role of democratic savior. Islamist groups view the silence and political and economic support offered to these regimes by American officials as a sign of their complicity and as evidence of American dual treatment of democracy promotion (Esposito, 2001: 277).

III- Regional Players

Sixty years have passed since the time when Americans established a mysterious link with the Saudi political system. Washington and



Riyadh established relations 40 years ago according to which the United States benefited from Saudi oil and in return Washington protected the House of Saud's reign, supporting those who possess one fifth of the world's crude oil reserves. Due to the heavy dependence of the United States and Europe on Saudi oil, the world powers have kept a close eye on Riyadh's medieval political system, depriving them of the chance to exert needed pressure on the monarchical system to undertake democratic reforms. This interdependence between Saudi Arabia and the West has contributed to the ruling Al Saud family's autonomy (Afrasiabi, 2004). A win-win game minus democracy and human rights has dominated U.S.-Saudi relations. In this way, the world's largest democracies have stood behind one of the most autocratic political regimes in the world for safeguarding their interests.

Events like the September 11th attacks and the involvement of Saudi nationals in it as well as their support for religious extremism in the region would show the interest and security conflict in U.S. power in the Middle East. Backed by the United States, the House of Saud has allowed their most hardline clergy to have a free hand, hoping to gain domestic legitimacy through their links with the clergy. The Saudi educational system is directed by the clergy with medieval mindsets. Within the past three decades, the Saudis have mostly through private trusts created their private schools and religious centers throughout the world, schools for disseminating Wahhabism (an outdated and rigid version of Islam which has served as a role model of most of the Islamic fundamentalists). These Saudi schools have trained thousands of semi-educated bigot Muslims within the past 30 years who look at the modern and non-Muslim world with suspicion and doubt (Zakaria, 2006: 171).

Along with these actions, aggrandizing the threat of Iran's growing influence in the Middle East and creating artificial crises, the Riyadh government channels American minds and Western public opinion away from the expansion of Salafist hardline Islam in the



region as exemplified by the Taliban and al-Qaeda (Kharrazi, 2011). Saudi Arabia represents one of the major opponents to the democratization wave in the Arab World. The House of Saud and other reactionary forces in the region that see the current developments as a threat to their survival are doing everything to bring these revolutions towards failure. In the domestic political realm, when faced with sparse unrest, the Saudi governments showed its violent character in such a way that Saudi foreign minister Saud al-Faisal who is famous for his tolerance threatened to cut off the fingers of the opponents wishing to challenge the government. From the onset of the Middle East developments, we have witnessed the detention of hundreds of Saudi citizens including Ms. Manal al-Sharif who spent nine days in detention for posting a video of her driving on the Internet. She was released just after she was forced to become committed to stopping her civil activities. In fact, the Saudi regime has made the Sharia an excuse to suppress any reformist demand (Jones, 2011: 40).

In the foreign policy sphere, the Saudi government has displayed paradoxical conduct towards the regional developments. Riyadh revealed absolute support for the Islamic Awakening in Libya, advocating a no-fly zone and regime change via the Arab League. The Saudi actions, however, should not be interpreted as objection to a despotic government. King Abdullah hated Muammar Gaddafi because the Libyan dictator constituted a big obstacle to pursuing the policy of the leadership of the Arab World. Naturally, Gaddafi's fall would increase chances for the realization of this goal. Support for international action in Libya paved the way for military intervention in Bahrain without any serious criticism by the Western allies of Saudi Arabia. After initially adopting vague positions towards the Syrian unrest, Riyadh condemned Assad's violent treatment of his people and recalled its ambassador to Damascus. This decision was not made to show sympathy for the Syrian people's predicament, but Riyadh has come to the conclusion that the fall of Bashar Assad's



government as Tehran's close ally would provide a chance for weakening Iran in the region. Saudi Arabia has demonstrated that it will fully support any anti-Iranian and anti-Shia move in the region (Jones, 2011: 40).

Furthermore, Bahrain, and to some extent, Yemen are set at the heart of Riyadh's regional and domestic policies. The House of Saud sees the Bahraini regime as the forefront of its defense vis-à-vis Iran as its most powerful regional rival. Perhaps for this reason, the British newspaper the Guardian writes: Democracy is arriving in the Middle East though sluggishly. But what proceeds more rapidly is the cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Some experts describe the fall of Mubarak's government after Ben Ali was overthrown in Tunisia as the moment of the Berlin Wall in the Middle East. Similarities between the current conditions in the Middle East and the Cold War in Europe go beyond this point. Other similarities are found between the entry of Soviet forces into the Hungarian capital Budapest in November 1956 in order to suppress the public uprising in the country and the Saudi decision to send troops to Bahrain on March 14, 2011. The Soviet authorities were concerned that Communist Hungary might fall at the hands of Western rivals in the Cold War; hence they felt that they needed to send troops to suppress such a progressive move. The new Saudi strategy is also based upon similar conclusions. They dispatched their troops to Bahrain because they felt that if the ongoing Shi'a movement in the country succeeded, it could transform Bahrain from a Saudi friend to Iran's ally (Javedanfar, 2011).

It should be mentioned that the Salafist rise to power as supported by Saudi Arabia and what this state is doing will create a future which might not be perceivable for the Western states right now. Turning Saudi Arabia – an important U.S. ally – into the superior power in the Muslim World and the region that bring its fellow-minded forces to power with petrodollars will be a catastrophic regression for the Middle East people and the world. The



day when the U.S. Administration supported the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the Soviet-occupied Afghanistan, it did not know what consequences it would lead to. But that historical act was like opening Pandora's Box whose future could not be imagined at that time. Current developments in the region also harbinger a future that will not be necessarily according to what its designers wish. The Arab reactionary forces crystalized in the Saudi and Qatari regimes make efforts at squandering the achievements of the popular uprisings in the Arab World. Certainly fraudulent Saudi dollars and Qatari micro-power will not produce democracy and human rights.

The Saudi government does not enjoy unlimited capacity for its reactionary and unpopular actions in the region. Particularly after the recent developments, the House of Saud enjoys the least popularity among the regional nations. Clearly supporting the process of transition to democracy and civil trends in the region, illuminating the nature of the reactionary Saudi government and the threat of the spread of the most rigid version of Islam by the Wahhabis, Iran is able to put the Riyadh government in a weak position, making the Western states aware of the perspective of a Sunni dictatorship inspired by Wahhabism. There is no doubt that the rise of a democratic independent government in Saudi Arabia would serve the national interests of regional players including Iran and the Western states in the long run. From the angle of political logic, states might compete in one area and cooperate in another. On this basis, one of the areas of shared interests between Iran and the West should be preventing the rise of hardline Salafist groups to power; groups which are supported by Saudi Arabia whose second export include terrorism. By clearly supporting the demands of the Middle Eastern nations, Iran has to preclude Saudi Arabia from playing the role of the architect of the future regional political structure.

Israel is fearful of the establishment of democracy in the Middle East. Democratic expansion in the region will influence its relations with the United States, its neighbors and its protracted conflict with



Palestinians. The first Israeli concern would be the impact that the rise of democracy in Arab countries will leave on its relations with the United States. The Israeli leaders claim that in a gulf of despotic regimes, they are the only island of liberal democracy in the region and as such they have to receive special attention from the United States. The rise of a true democracy in the Arab countries, and particularly in the most populous Arab country, i.e. Egypt, however, will disrupt this narrative. Then suddenly the largest exceptional logic for U.S. all-out support for Israel will be seriously undermined (Pillar, 2011: 48).

Under such a condition, Israel will not be able to pretend that lack of democracy in the Arab World is the cause of closeness and heavy reliance on the United States and its isolation in the region. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu used to claim that democracy was critical for a true peace; hence non-democratic states were unreliable and not committed to the treaties they sign. Now it seems that democracy is not necessarily something favorable for Israel (Byman, 2011: 129).

On the other hand, decreasing U.S. influence in the region as a result of recent developments will not present a good prospect for the improvement of political relations between Israel and its neighbors. Apparently the Obama Administration, in comparison to its predecessors, is less willing to exert pressure on the Arab leaders for peace with Israel and is less able to give concessions to Israel in return for its withdrawal which entails security threats. At the same time, financial crises have harmed the U.S. Administration's capability to provide financial incentives to both parties (Inbar, 2012: 43). Perhaps this is the reason why Hillary Clinton suggests that "We are committed to safeguarding Israeli security, but Israel also has to help itself and grant concessions to reach peace with Palestinians, enabling it to protect the Israeli borders." This position can be seen in various occasions expressed by American authorities (Sadatian, 2011).

The other concern of Israel is the fall of Hosni Mubarak and the



question of his succession in the Egyptian government. In most of the past Israeli history, Egypt has proved its most dangerous enemy as the two fought wars in 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973. Sadat and his successor Hosni Mubarak, nonetheless, put an end to this seemingly endless conflict. With the conclusion of the peace treaty, the biggest enemy of Israel became its ally. For accepting peace with Israel, Islamic hardliners assassinated Sadat. But Mubarak remained committed to the peace treaty, designating common goals with Tel Aviv, opposing revolutionary Iran which advocated the Palestinian people's struggle, and did everything to inflame the question of Iranian Shiism vis-à-vis Sunnism of compromising Arab states in order to escape historical responsibilities and the Palestinian people's cause for acquitting himself before the regional public opinion. He worked with Israel against Hamas, blocked the Rafah passage between Egypt and Gaza and helped Israel restrict transit of goods and persons into and out of the Gaza Strip. In this way, because of its apparent cooperation with Israel in the war on Gaza, the Egyptian government became the number one defendant among the public opinion of the Arab and Muslim Worlds (Byman, 2011: 125). Prominent expert on the Arab World Rami Khouri describes a widespread feeling of humiliation among the Egyptians who see themselves as the prison guards of Gazans on behalf of Israel and Washington. Undoubtedly any government that represents the public opinion of the Egyptian nation would remove the pressures on Gaza, eliminating the restrictions in the Rafah passage. The new government has already declared that it would reopen the Rafah crossing, ceasing to cooperate in the economic blockade of Gaza. In this relation, the Egyptian Foreign Minister Nabil El-Arabi remarked that the "national security of Egypt and Palestinians is the same" (Byman, 2011: 131).

Generally speaking, Hosni Mubarak's proximity to Israel contained significant strategic and psychological value for Israel. This not only removed the most powerful Arab army from the military



balance of power with Israel, safeguarding Israeli security in its south, allowing it to reduce its defense expenditures, but also it alleviated its sense of suffocation arising from being encircled by enemies during the first three decades of its existence, indicating that peace with the states opposing Israel was possible. At present, with the change in situation, when Israel is faced with Iran's growing threat and has to counter Hezbollah and Hamas respectively in its north and south, losing Hosni Mubarak has been a strategic nightmare and serious psychological blow.

Therefore, from the Israeli perspective, Mubarak might have been a notorious dictator leading a corrupt and ruthless regime, but at least he was reliable for preserving peace with Israel and containing the Islamists. Anybody who comes to power in Egypt might not be as reliable (Waxman, 2011). For this reason, the loss of Hosni Mubarak and his regime seemed irreparable for Israel. The Israeli analyst Aluf Benn notes that "Israel has seen eight prime ministers, has fought several times and has been involved in multilateral peace negotiations in all of which Mubarak has been a permanent partner" (Byman, 2011: 125).

Former Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan also points to a bitter fact: "Israel has concluded two peace treaties so far – one with Egypt and the other with Jordan – which both have been signed by dictators: Anwar Sadat and King Hussein. In other words, Israelis are very satisfied with people like Mubarak and King Hussein because they are situated beyond the mainstream of their societies" (Byman, 2011: 129-130). Without any doubt, the biggest blow to the Zionists because of the Islamic Awakening was the fall of Hosni Mubarak's regime in Egypt; a regime that although apparently in the Arab front and committed to defending Palestinians vis-à-vis the Zionists, in practice turned into a protecting wall for Israel and even in cases like the Gaza blockade became a suppressing arm for Israelis against Palestinians. Certainly, losing such an ally has been a bitter irremediable event for the Israelis.



The authorities of the new government in Egypt allowed an angry crowd to storm the Israeli embassy in Cairo in September 2011, forcing the ambassador to leave. Israelis, furthermore, are concerned about the Egyptian government's reluctance to safeguard security in the Sinai Peninsula. Since the fall of Mubarak, six cases of sabotage have occurred in the pipelines carrying Egyptian natural gas to Israel. This problem has made Israel rely more upon fossil fuels for producing electricity, which has cost it on average \$2.7 million per day between July and August 2012 (Inbar, 2012: 44).

In order to revive its critical role in the Muslim World and among the Arabs, Egypt needs a new strategy; a strategy that requires detachment from the Mubarak regime's policies and forming a policy based on the demands of the public opinion of Egyptians, Arabs and Muslims. The new Egyptian authorities have begun change in the country's attitude in the domestic sphere with removing the effects and authorities of the old regime and in the foreign realm, by getting closer to the Islamic resistance pivot and distancing themselves from the United States and Israel (Moshtaghi, 2011). Most of the leaders of Egyptian political parties have declared that the age of the Camp David Accords has ended. Although most of these anti-Israeli slogans might be voiced for campaign purposes, in a true democracy politicians are always unable to evade the slogans and promises made during the election season.

The other problem relates to the fact that realizing popular sovereignty in Arab countries would further highlight the lack of sovereignty for Palestinians under Israeli occupation. In the worst case scenario, the effects of the Arab uprisings could lead to a third Intifada among the Palestinians. Even though this has not occurred, enlarged political rights in neighboring countries including the right to self-determination and the deprivation of Palestinian people will be further felt, leading to future protests. The fact that people in Egypt and Tunisia became able to gain a lot of things peacefully has caused feelings of pride and self-confidence in Palestinians. The signing of a



reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas after four years of futile conflict was another disastrous event for the Israeli leaders. It was crystal clear that they took benefit from schism in the Palestinian lines within the past years, continuing their expansionist and occupation policies. Certainly now that the two main Palestinian factions seek solidarity and unity among Palestinians as affected by the wave of awakening in the Arab World in order to attain more important goals such as the establishment of an independent Palestinian state will severely harm Israeli extremists. The protest gatherings on Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories' borders on the 63rd anniversary of the establishment of Israel, called Day of Catastrophe by the Arabs, and another protest gathering on the 44th anniversary of the Six-day Arab-Israeli war showed that the anti-Israeli wave was moving along with the wave of Arab search for freedom (IRNA, 2011).

Hence, Israel for a variety of reasons is concerned about what is going on in Egypt and perhaps in Jordan. Israelis have bitter experiences with the previous changes in the region, as the rise to power of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza put emphasis upon this fear. Then their deep feeling of vulnerability alone is not a simple illusion (even considering the Israeli military capability). Israel is small with a small population; so it has little space and opportunity for mistake in its calculations related to security (Waxman, 2011).

Israel knows that the peace treaty it concluded with Egypt and Jordan has to be considered as the individual decision made by the then rulers (Anwar Sadat and King Hussein) according to the political reality logic rather than public demand and popular feelings. Along this point of view, Israel assumes that if Egyptian and Jordanian people have a choice, the peace treaty will disappear soon. For the Israeli leaders, democratic tendencies and instability of Arab ruling regimes can benefit Iran as the main Israeli enemy and regional Islamists, changing the rules of the game to Iran and the resistance front's benefit. Issuing a permit for Iranian vessels for passing



through the Suez Canal by the transitional Egyptian government indicated that Iran's relations with the new Egyptian government could differ from Iran's relations with Mubarak's government. What we see in Tunisia, Libya and Yemen is indeed an effort for normalization of relations with Iran.

Generally speaking, Israel was not willing to create democratic changes in the Arab World because the corrupt autocratic Arab rulers, due to lack of domestic legitimacy, are deeply dependent on the United States which represents Israel's strategic ally. Hence the Arab states have been unable to pose a crisis and challenge to Israel. Israel has even adopted a silent policy towards the Syrian crisis and while it is not hopeful to influence its surrounding environment, it has to prepare itself for countering security challenges arising from the political developments in the Arab World; threats that account for Israel's distrust in the regional political and geopolitical prospects.

IV. Iran

In recent years and after the success of Shi'aa candidates in the Iraqi elections and Lebanese Hezbollah's gaining of power, Arab leaders (like the Jordanian King) have expressed concerns about the supposed Shi'a Crescent, constantly fearing the loyalty of Arab Shi'a to Iran. Warnings by the Arab states concerning the Shi'a activities are heard from such countries as Jordan and Egypt where there should not be any fear of the Shi'a political revival due to the absence of a Shi'a minority. In most cases, instigating fear concerning Shi'a moves is indeed an instrument at the hands of autocratic rulers used masterfully to counter Iranian popular policies (such as support for Palestinian rights) among their nations and discrediting the criticisms of domestic opponents of their unpopular policies (Lotfian, 2011: 187).

Indeed, the Shi'a Crescent has to be construed as the resistance axis vis-à-vis the United States and Israel in the region. This trend has given rise to a new formation in the Middle East called the Islamic Middle East, a Middle East whose characteristics entirely contradict



U.S. and Western interests. In response to such a phenomenon, autocratic Arab leaders tried to make the Islamic Middle East tantamount to the Shi'a Crescent in order to prevent the prospect of other regional nations joining it. However, after the Hamas movement gained victory in the Palestinian territories and the Muslim Brotherhood reached acceptable results in the Egyptian elections, the hegemonic system once again found itself versus a strong Islamist current including the Shi'a and Sunnis. Certainly the rise of the Islamic Middle East, a new Shi'a political identity in the region and Muslim inclination to it would lead to rising Iranian power as the major regional actor, which is exactly opposed to the regional interests of the hegemonic system (Moinoddini & Abolhassan Shirazi, 2009: 155).

In recent months with the Islamic Awakening, we see the disruption of the anti-Iranian coalition forged by the United States in the region and its efforts at creating a coalition of Arab regimes against Iran have failed absolutely, because the peoples in the Arab countries disagree with their own leaders. Hence since the Islamic Republic of Iran's identity has been defined vis-à-vis the West and the United States, Iran must back up changes that lead to the decline in the U.S. role and influence in the region. If the trend of developments in the Arab World moves towards the establishment of democracy, certainly Iran's regional role and influence will increase, promoting Iranian national security.

This is the reason why President of the Council on Foreign Relations Richard Haas argued in an article entitled "The New Middle East" that a new era has started in the Middle East whose major characteristic is the end of U.S. hegemony in the region and a clear shift in the balance of power in Iran's interest; a change that has to be avoided (Shariatinia, 2010: 199). On the other hand, the situation between Iran and Israel is a zero-sum game, meaning that the increase in one party's power would lead to decrease in the other party's power. Obviously with the disintegration of relations between elected Arab governments and Israel, Iran's maneuverability has grown in the



region, giving it a better status vis-à-vis Israel. Israel's increasing isolation and its declining status in the region fully serve the Islamic Republic's security objectives.

On the other hand, the most important issue for Iran after the recent developments is the Egyptian withdrawal from the leadership role of the anti-Iranian coalition in the Arab World. For the new Egyptian government, establishing balanced close ties with Iran as one of the most powerful non-Arab states in the region and the largest actor in the Persian Gulf area matters a lot in terms of regional balance of power and global equations. This change can strengthen the Egyptian position in relations with Israel in two directions including the Arab-Israeli peace process and general nuclear disarmament in the Middle East. Within this framework, Iran's look at the demands of Bahraini people and the Shi'a community in eastern Saudi Arabia has to be one based upon support for the general public's demands. Iran's priority has to be focus on support for democracy in Yemen in order to counter Saudi influence. Regarding Syria, Iran should adopt a realist policy based on safeguarding its strategic interest, adjusting its positions according to the realities on the ground in Syrian society. The alliance between the two countries, which is derived from the special conditions governing Iran-Syria-Hezbollah relations in the conflict with Israel, seems to continue even under the conditions of accepting certain changes in Syria (Barzegar, 2011). Iran must accept that there is no permanent friend or enemy in the international system, what is permanent is its national interest. If Iran fails to support the Syrian people, it will not be able to speak out on developments in other countries like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. If Iran establishes a logical connection with the Syrian opposition, it will certainly have a chance to safeguard Iranian and Lebanese Shi'a interests in the future Syrian government.

A new Syria with a sovereignty based upon democratic principles will best serve Iranian interests. A homegrown democracy in the Arab Mediterranean region will represent the biggest enemy to



monarchical governments of Hashemite Jordan and Saudi Arabia as well as racist Israel. The logic of occupying Israeli rulers will fail vis-à-vis the logic of a democratic Arab nation, and this will be the Syrian nation that in case of achieving a true republic and given the growing power of democracy will be able to recapture its occupied territory in the Golan Heights from the Israelis.

Moreover, the consolidation of democratic governments in the region will usher in stability in these countries, because it will reduce political tensions and regulate political competition within them. The presence of internal stability in these countries along with the fact that democracies do not fight each other will lead to a brighter perspective of stability at the regional level. Democratization of the Arab countries would lead to a dramatic reduction of the security threats posed to Iran because of the pursuit of militarist, adventurist and anti-Iranian policies. Meanwhile, the rules of the game in the Middle East are that of zero-sum and threats are of a military nature. This is the case while growth and development in the regional countries hinge upon a decreased level of conflicts and creation of a safe and stable environment for investment and production. Certainly, the strong rule of democracy can protect peace under such conditions. Therefore, in order to enhance its national security, the Islamic Republic of Iran has to further encourage the democratization process in the Middle East, assessing it to be in line with its national interests (Hafezian, 2006: 60).

Meanwhile, the threat of hardline Salafist groups' rise to power, which are anti-Shia and do not look positively at the Islamic Republic, can bring about certain dangers for Iran. Through coordination with other political forces in these countries, Iran should prevent the unfolding of such a threat. Of course, considering their enmity against Western countries, these efforts can be implemented with their cooperation. In other words, efforts at preventing these groups' coming to power constitute the shared interests of Iran and the West (Hafezian, 2006: 61).



Conclusion

The enthusiasm of Arab nations in participating in the political affairs of their countries has raised hope that the age of despotism will end. In a general look, even though this new wave of Islamic Awakening does not lead to full democracy it will herald in a new era of popular participation in which governments will act more responsibly. Currently the remaining despotic regimes have gathered around Israel in order to prevent the threat of overthrow and the rise of Islamist forces (in the wave of democracy seeking that has swept across the region) for protecting their existence with Israeli help. The fear of Islamist rise to power has created an unusual alliance between Middle Eastern authoritarian governments and Western democracies, providing a needed excuse for suppression and violation of human rights in such countries as Bahrain, Yemen and Saudi Arabia. The American-Zionist axis assisted by the Saudi and Qatari petrodollars seeks to prevent the occurrence of the Islamic Revolution's experience; thus numerous plans and strategies including making the conflict in Bahrain one of attrition or reviving the political order of Ben Ali's regime in Tunisia are on the agenda. The conservative Arab governments, the West and Israel see Iran as a threat for shared and different reasons.

Any country that believes in human rights, citizenship rights, rule of law and democracy has to look positively at the ongoing developments. Iran should become the pioneer in promotion of democracy in the Middle East. Iran's support for all democracy-seeking movements in the region will be fully consistent with the Islamic and humanist principles regardless of religious tendencies. If the country's diplomatic apparatus takes the Wikileaks documents into consideration, it will learn that today Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and certain regional Arab states constitute Iran's number one national security threat. Hence any change that leads to the weakness or fall of these illegitimate rulers will be assessed as in



line with Iran's national interests. Presently the Wahhabi Saudi government constitutes the center of dictatorship in the Arab World and the main enemy of Iran and Shi'a Muslims. Hence the undermining or destruction of this old despotic regime will be to the benefit of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Muslim World. It should be also considered that the Shi'a rise to power in the region has been accompanied with democratic expansion in the region. In other words, the presence of the Shi'a in government is closely related to the promotion of democratic trends, support for the democracy-seeking wave in the Middle East and expansion of democracy would enhance the Islamic Republic of Iran's national security and securing of national interest as well as an important factor in strengthening Iran's influence in the region.

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