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Arab-Iranian Relations: Discourses of conflict and cooperation

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Introduction

This briefing is a follow up to an LSE conference held jointly by the Middle East Centre and the Department of International Relations with generous funding from the Dinam charity. The conference entitled ‘Arab-Iranian Relations: discourses of conflict and cooperation’ was held on 7 September 2011. The conference focused on four themes.

1. Developments in Iran and the Arab world since 2003
2. The role of media and conflict in Arab-Iranian relations
3. Discourses of ethnicity, religion and nation
4. National Security, Regional Stability: Prospects for Arab-Iranian Conflict and Cooperation

Relations between Iran and its Arab neighbours have been marked by a complex ebb and flow of tensions, suspicions and alliances. Now, in the midst of the Arab uprisings, these relations have been thrown into greater flux as opportunity for change is mixed with uncertainty. There are concerns as to whether these reconfigurations make conflict between Iran and one or more of the Arab states more or less likely. Consideration of what approaches can be developed to foster cooperation in the midst of such uncertainty is crucial.

Although the attention of the international community is often fixed on the Iranian nuclear file, the aim of the conference and this subsequent report is to look beyond this single issue to avoid using it as the single lens with which to view the potential conflict. Using the discussions that came out of the conference as a basis, this report will

evaluate in broad terms the narratives and mechanisms of conflict and cooperation that are currently emerging in the Middle East.

2001-2011: A decade of change

The events of 9/11 ushered in a decade of shifting relations within the Middle East and the international relations of Middle Eastern states. Two wars followed, in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraq in 2003. With the Taliban ousted and Saddam Hussein’s regime destroyed, Iran emerged as apparently the most threatening member of the ‘Axis of Evil’. This sense of Iran as a threat was not only perceived by some Western states. In 2004, King Abdullah of Jordan coined the term ‘Shia Crescent’ to express concerns held in the region regarding Iran’s assumed agenda for hegemony. The increased perception of Iran as a threat was compounded by the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 and his re-election in 2009. The crackdown on the Green Movement that emerged partially under the leadership of Mir-Hussein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi as a result of the disputed 2009 election was eventually pushed underground and it had appeared that the momentum for change had stalled. The application of new sanctions on Iran in 2010 cancelled any room for manoeuvre that might have remained as the Iranian regime dug in against domestic and international opposition.

The endurance of autocratic regimes and democratic deficits was also well entrenched across Arab states. In 2000, Bashar al-Assad moved swiftly and smoothly into his father’s seat as president of Syria. In Egypt there was a widespread expectation that Gamal Mubarak would inherit his father’s

presidency. The future for Iran and the Arab world's growing and youthful populations looked stagnant as change appeared to be elusive, even while many of the regimes used the jargon of democracy to claim flimsy credibility.

Policies towards the Middle East as a whole had tended to see such stagnation as stability in a region beset with challenges and conflict. This was seen in the acceptance granted to authoritarian regimes, particularly Egypt, and in the continued reliance on sanctions to deal with Iran's nuclear programme vis-à-vis Iran's nuclear file. As Professor Gary Sick argued, sanctions have even benefited the Revolutionary Guards, who are increasingly taking positions of power within Iran, because they control the black market economy. Professor Sick went on to assert that the sanctions put in place have been premised on the basis of no enrichment. This meant that from the start there was nothing to negotiate with and this has led to a wasted decade.

Such approaches attempted to freeze relations of power in a region where demographics, globalisation, media and economics, were among some of the factors changing the environment upon which this fixed structure of relations balanced. As a result this has also been a wasted decade for the promotion of a culture of democracy and good governance. The events collectively, though not entirely accurately, known as the Arab Spring revealed these massive shifts that had been hidden to some degree by the focus on apparently enduring regimes. This was a process waiting to happen, but it is a long term process that will reach far beyond the spring of 2011. It is also a process that is likely to have an impact on relations between Iran and each of the Arab states.

Iran and the Uprisings

Authoritarianism endures by entrenching the status quo and the new reconfigurations and changes challenge this, not only in the Arab world but also in Iran. The inclusive nature of protests caused dilemmas for the way they were reported and interpreted. The coverage that Iranian media broadcast of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt pointed to Tehran's fears of the popular movements in Arab states. The demands for democracy and a civil state were overlooked by Iran's official media. The uprisings were constructed as Islamic revolutions inspired by the Iranian example. The resignation of Egypt's former president Hosni Mubarak on 11 February, the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic revolution, served this narrative well. Images of these two events were conflated together to support the conclusion that events in Egypt were a natural development proceeding out of the Iranian Islamic revolution.

Not only were these protests presented as Islamic revolutions, but they were also presented as resistance against Arab leaders backed by western states. This led to difficulties with the uprising in Syria. The al-Assad regime in Syria has been an Iranian ally and a partner in the funding and supplying of Hezbollah in Lebanon. This explains why Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamane'i omitted Syria when he prayed for the uprising across the Arab world. Iranian media portrayed Syria as a stalwart against Israel and the West, much as Iran likes to perceive itself. The Iranian government claimed that the demonstrations in Syria are incited by the West, echoing the accusations made against the 2009 protests that followed the disputed Iranian presidential election.

This linking of the protests to Islamism and anti-western sentiment caused a dilemma for Iran's stance vis-à-vis Libya, when NATO came in to support the resistance there. It also caused difficulties when the Iranian opposition attempted to use events in Egypt to re-ignite protests in Iran. Mousavi and Karroubi requested a permit to hold a demonstration in solidarity with Egypt and began calls to renew Green Movement protests on 14 February 2011. The permit was denied and a heavy Baseej presence prevented the calls to protest from being effectively answered. While the Iranian opposition tried to catch the wave of the Arab protests, state media used events in the Arab world to try to undermine domestic opposition by linking it to pro-western movements. Iranian opposition groups tried to counter this by linking protests in Egypt to the Iranian experience. In their narratives they used the image of a pharaoh, ignorant of his people's cries for justice, to link the reaction of Mubarak's government to the Egyptian protests with that of the Iranian government in 2009 towards the green movement.

It is apparent that upheaval and conflict in the Arab world has an impact in Iran and vice versa. Egyptian activists on social media established solidarity campaigns with Iran during the 2009 Green Movement demonstrations and the use of social media in Iran during that time encouraged social media activists in Arab states. In both Iran and Arab states, the media has played a role in political mobilisation and social practises. This is not a new phenomenon. Sreberny – Mohammadi and Mohammadi¹ pointed to the use of small media, such as cassettes, in the Iranian revolution and Abu-Lughod² has pointed to the potential impact of

cassettes on cultural life and social relations among Egypt's Bedouin.

This explains why governments across the Middle East, as elsewhere, have made efforts to contain media content or limit access to it. For part of Egypt's uprising, Internet access and mobile phone networks were severely reduced and during Iran's 2009 protest, Internet speed was dramatically reduced. Another tactic for maintaining control over media by limiting access to non-state media has been to jam satellite signals. BBC Persian, a UK-based Farsi-language television channel, was launched in 2009 and has suffered repeated jamming. In September 2011, the BBC stated that it has faced jamming on both the Hotbird satellite and the Eutelsat W3A satellite. Eutelsat established that the source of the interference was Iran.³ Such interference is contrary to international conventions for the use of satellites, yet satellite companies and governments appear unable to prevent this from continuing. Meanwhile, Iranian channels continue to broadcast on the same satellites. This action by Iran suggests that BBC Persian could undermine Iranian government narratives, as suggested by the head of BBC Persian Sadeq Saba during the conference. Another Iranian journalist at the conference pointed out that anyone without access to news sources other than Iranian ones would have believed that Egypt and Tunisia were setting up Islamic Republics based on Iran's model. This underlines the importance of supporting objective media and freedom of information.⁴

The Rise of Turkey

One of the suggested motivations for this concerted effort to claim a role in the Arab uprisings, is Iran's fear that its

revolutionary model has been definitively undermined by events across the Middle East in 2011. Instead of a pan-Islamism, a renewed nationalism has emerged, both in Arab states and in Turkey. Dr Katerina Dalacoura argued that the Arab uprisings epitomise the fact that the Iranian Islamist model is on its way out, while the Turkish Islamist model is on its way in. This suggests why former Judiciary chief Ayatollah Hashemi Shahroudi said in August 2011 that Turkey is using developments in the region to its advantage by promoting liberal Islam.⁵ In contrast, he emphasised that Iran's Islam is true Islam.

Turkey's rise to prominence in 2011 has tested the previously good relations between Ankara and Tehran. Iran welcomed Turkey's mediation, along with Brazil's, on the nuclear issue in 2010. However, the wave of uprisings in 2011 has not only reconfigured the political landscape in Arab states. As Turkey's critical stance on the violence in Syria grows stronger, so relations with Iran have become more strained. Instead of being an ally, there are suggestions that Turkey is now seen in Iran as a regional competitor. Turkey's stable economic outlook and good relations with its Middle Eastern neighbours-boosted by strong bilateral trade-and also with western states has put it in a favourable position. Turkey's strong stance towards Israel since 2008 has also boosted Turkey's popularity among the publics of some Arab states. This explains why, in the aftermath of Egypt's January/February 2011 protests, one of the most popular questions being asked was whether Egypt could reproduce the 'Turkish model' after its political transition.

This model should not be accepted with unwarranted optimism. There has been a

tendency to refer to the rise of Turkey and its new confidence using the metaphor of neo-Ottomanism, which suggests that while Turkey's assertiveness is useful, cultivating Turkey as the one major power in the region should be avoided because of the connotations with the Ottoman Empire that once dominated Arab states. Turkey needs to avoid the risk of Neo-Ottomanism replacing the narrative of the 'Shia crescent' as the regional discourse of the major threat for Arab states. Turkey has managed to maintain relations with Saudi Arabia so far, even while it developed ties with Syria and Iran. Ironically, its tougher stance on Iran and Syria could lead to rivalry with Saudi Arabia for Sunni Arab leadership. An Egypt emerging from transition will also be seeking to assert itself regionally. This was evident in the efforts by Cairo to reconcile Hamas and Fatah and also in brokering the prisoner exchange deal that released Gilad Shalit in October 2011. Iraq is a third state that will become increasingly significant in Turkey's foreign policy strategy. Iraq is a larger market for Turkey than Iran is and could become a major competitor for Iran once more, especially if Iraq increases its oil exports.

If Turkey is to continue to rise in prominence in the region it will need to undertake careful diplomacy to establish cooperation without rivalry. It will also need to balance external relations with maintaining its own balance of democracy and Islam. Achieving this balance with Iran could be the most complex, particularly in light of the Syrian uprising. Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar suggests that Turkey is already being represented in Iran as part of a bigger U.S.-Israel-Saudi plot to undermine the Islamic nature of the 2011 uprisings.⁶ This discourse would surely be promoted if Turkey were to begin to play a new and strong role diplomatically in

the Gulf region as a mediator. Fadi Hakura also identifies a number of domestic challenges that could prevent Turkey from becoming a model for the region, including, ‘the Kurdish conflagration, a quasi-secular system of government and a fragile democracy’.⁷

Enduring Paradigms: nationalism, pan-Islamism and sectarianism

The view that emerged from this conference was that religion is not driving protests in Iran or Arab countries. However, religion is certainly used as a tool. During the Iran-Iraq war, the Iranian leadership attempted to appeal to Shia solidarity when Iranian troops laid siege to Basra in 1982. However, the Iraqi Shia garrison did not respond to calls to rebel in favour of Shia Iran but rather maintained their loyalty to Iraqi nationalism.⁸ It is certainly true that both Iran and Iraq used narratives infused with allusions to religious history and identity to gain legitimacy and also moral authority but the narratives of Arabism and Iraqi nationalism seem to have been played out more strongly on the ground than Shia ones.

Nevertheless, religion does often provide a language of resistance. Friday prayers and Coptic liturgies were held in Tahrir square during Egypt’s protests, providing unifying and instantly recognisable forms of solidarity. In Iran in 2009, the phenomenon of chanting “Allahu Akhbar” from the rooftops at night was widespread in Tehran as a sign of defiance. Religion thus provides a way to call for, and demonstrate, solidarity. Yet the supranational nature of religious belonging can lead to localised tensions. In Egypt, the Coptic Church often rejects the activism of Copts in the diaspora who seek to raise awareness about Coptic

rights. Many Copts fear that such activism outside Egypt makes Copts inside Egypt more vulnerable to suspicion and accusations of betraying the Egyptian nation. The Coptic Church faces periodical accusations that it desires to set up a Christian ‘state within the state’.⁹

Similarly, the idea that belonging to the Shia sect affords a supra-national identity construction that supports mobilisation against the nation state is a factor in tensions in a number of Arab states. Likewise in Iran, many of the Ahwaz identify with Sunni Islam and Arab ethnicity and use this as their language of resistance against the Iranian government. The Iranian government on the other hand, seeks to base its foreign policy on pan-Islamism¹⁰ and the Iranian revolution’s claim to speak for the Islamic ‘Ummah’ causes relations between Iran and Arab states to deteriorate and mutual suspicion to grow because it feeds into a regional rivalry based on who represents a supranational Islamic nation.¹¹ According to Professor Sajjad Rizvi, Shia Arabs have faced suspicion and labelling as ‘Safawis’ in reference to the Persian Safavid dynasty under which Iran became a Shia country. The aim is to imply that they are a fifth column due to their Shia faith and sometimes even that they are Persian rather than Arab in ethnicity.

This ignores the variations within the Shia faith itself. Although Shia influence in Iraq is now far greater than during Sadaam Hussein’s regime, there is actually friendly competition between the Shia clerics of Najaf in Iraq and those of Qom in Iran. The Iraqi Shia clerics do not necessarily support the Iranian system of *Velayat-i-Faqih* that Ayatollah Khomeini introduced after the 1979 Iranian revolution. In fact they argue that it goes against traditional Shia thinking regarding the relationship

between clerics and the state. This model was therefore opposed by the most prominent Shia cleric at the time of the Iranian revolution, Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei. Vali Nasr argues that al-Khoei's opposition actually limited Iran's revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini's ability to spread his ideology and power.¹²

The tendency to use sect as a label for difference is a weak point that contributes to social tensions.¹³ It can also be institutionalised or entrenched in cultural practices. Even though the worst of the sectarian violence in Iraq has subsided, Iraqi media remains strongly divided along sectarian lines. In Egypt, state media incited sectarian violence against Copts during the violence at Maspero in Cairo on 9 October 2011 when more than 24 Coptic protesters were killed by soldiers after violence erupted. Since the uprising, Copts, Egypt's largest Christian community, have felt increasingly disenfranchised from the state as a result of an increase in attacks on churches and the government's failure to address their concerns.¹⁴ When groups are marginalised and even suspected by their government social instability and conflict are often the result. Therefore the inability to manage difference, whether based on religion, sect or ethnicity, will lead to continued instability and protracted social tensions.¹⁵

Despite the apparent endurance of sectarianism and 'othering' as elements in conflict, during the conference Dr Dalacoura concluded that the Arab Spring is likely to increase nationalism and lead to a move away from universalist or transnational ideologies. Professor Ali Ansari also concluded that nationalism is increasingly important in Iran. He described how president Ahmadinejad is

leaning on nationalist discourses and exploiting the symbolism of the ancient Persian Empire, such as the figure of Cyrus the great Persian king, to boost his nationalist agenda.

Conclusion

The events of 2011 cannot be collectively described accurately as an Arab Spring. The protests of each Arab state represent the result of a different mixture of domestic and external factors, therefore the aims and outcomes of these different national movements are unlikely to take exactly the same shape. Each movement has developed in different ways for different reasons, and this nuanced perspective is part of a general need to speak of Middle Eastern states with specificity and refrain from viewing the region as one bloc. This is even more crucial when we take into consideration relations with Iran and Turkey's place in Middle Eastern politics.

The momentum of the uprisings across the region Middle East has the potential to act as a mechanism to move away from a focus on the idea of a regional superpower and to promote cooperation between these states based on mutual interests and the objective of regional development. This could prevent further rivalries over the balance of power in the region. This basis also moves away from enduring ideological paradigms which are often based on transnational identities, such as religion, religious sect or ethnicity. The cooperation that they offer is exclusive or unrepresentative and there is a tendency to lead to conflict because they are perceived to weaken the integrity of the nation state. Building relations on such paradigms also fails to establish the ability of societies to manage difference and 'otherness'. This undermines effective

cooperation and the domestic, regional and international levels.

Recommendations

- Turkey, with its new assertiveness and foreign policy approach, should be explored as a potential regional mediator. But being a non-Arab state could undermine such a role if Ankara begins to be viewed as rival to Saudi Arabia and Egypt and should not be seen as a ‘cure-all’. The aim should be to build consensual multilateral relations in the Middle East, not a reliance on one or two major powers.
- The international community should move beyond sanctions as a default mechanism to address Iran’s nuclear file. Ineffective sanctions have simply ‘frozen’ the conflict and let the issue stagnate. Middle Eastern states should play a more public role in the discussions concerning Iran’s nuclear programme.
- The states in the region need to move beyond sectarianism or claims to universalist leadership. Such claims create rivalry and raise the likelihood of conflict and weak nation states.
- Objective and independent media should be promoted. Steps should be taken to address the issue of the jamming of satellite signals.
- There should be an increased focus on establishing an inclusive culture and civil society that enables societies to manage difference and promote equality before the state. This would help to reduce the risk of social tensions and give minorities a stronger stake in the nation state. Giving all interest groups within a state a voice and a platform enables groups to mobilise through democratic mechanisms within the domestic context. This reduces the need for transnational alliances or supranational ideologies for empowerment or resistance.
- The idea of acceptance, beyond simple tolerance, should be supported by, and reflected in, the media, national public dialogue and perhaps most crucially in the education system.

Conference participants

Chairs and speakers: Professor Ali Ansari, St Andrews University
David Butter, Economist Intelligence Unit
Dr Katerina Dalacoura, Department of International Relations, LSE
Dr Nelida Fuccaro, SOAS
Dr Hassan Hakimian, London Middle East Institute, SOAS
Nasser Kalawoun, Freelance journalist and translator
Dr Noha Mellor, Kingston University
Dr Neil Partrick, Visiting Fellow, LSE Kuwait Programme, and Associate Fellow, Royal United Service Institute
Professor Sajjad Rizvi, Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter
Sadeq Saba, Head of BBC Persian
Nahid Siadmoust, Time Magazine, Oxford University
Professor Gary Sick, Columbia University
Dr Mahjoub Zweiri, Humanities Department, Qatar University

Conference convener: Dr Elizabeth Iskander, Department of International Relations, LSE

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