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Iranian Views on the Awakening, the Crisis in Europe, and the Future of the United States in the Middle East

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In the eyes of many Iranians the United States and its European allies have for decades justified their policies towards Iran based upon a mythological construction, whereby the Islamic Republic of Iran is an “irrational” and “illegitimate” force that threatens world peace. In fact, since the 1979 Revolution in Iran and the Islamic Republic’s move towards political independence from the United States, the American political establishment in particular has used this myth to justify its policy on Iran which has been based largely on antagonism and aggression. The U.S. has attempted to force other states to minimize their relations with Iran, they have attempted to cause suffering among ordinary Iranians through a comprehensive economic embargo, they have even threatened third countries and their companies (such as the Republic of Korea) who trade with Iran, they have actively supported terrorist organizations and “regime change” in Iran, and they

supported Saddam Hussein in his aggressive war against the country.

Of course, the Iran-Iraq war caused enormous suffering to the people of Iran and Iranians and in the decades ahead they will not forget the key role which Western countries played. It is not possible for them to forget that their suffering was largely because of American and European support for Saddam Hussein, including Western support for his acquisition of Weapons of Mass Destruction, which he regularly used against Iranian and Iraqi civilians. There was not even verbal condemnation from western governments or even the mainstream Western media when these cruel and barbaric acts were taking place. Indeed, these countries' governments actively attempted to prevent Iran from purchasing gas masks to protect its people from the chemical and even biological weapons that were being extensively used by Iraqi forces.

Nevertheless, this extraordinary hostility towards Iran has increased even further since the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. Western countries, which are simultaneously experiencing massive economic crisis, are deeply concerned that they are losing hold of this extraordinarily important and strategic part of the world. The U.S. and its European allies from the very beginning tried especially hard to preserve the dictatorships in Tunisia, Yemen, Bahrain, and Egypt. Indeed, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton even attempted to justify and "legitimize" the effective occupation of Bahrain by Saudi forces that were there in order to crush the popular uprising in the country.¹⁾ Despite all this, many Western analysts and government officials after

1) Seyed Mohammad Marandi, "The American Misreading of Iran and the Changing Reality of the Middle East," *The Race for Iran* blog, June 1, 2011, <http://www.raceforiran.com/american-misreading-of-iran-and-the-changing-reality-of-the-middle-east>.

the fall of the Egyptian tyrant have attempted to depict the changes and upheavals in the region as secular and pro-Western, while at the same time they have been largely quiet about the rise of well-funded extremist ideologies.

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

Ayatollah Khamenei went on to speak about the history and intellectual traditions that have given Egypt its unparalleled importance in the Arab world. In this context, he described the movement unfolding in Egypt as both Islamic and freedom-seeking, with its potential for significant impact on the Middle East. Noting that the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt had parallels to Iran's revolution more than three decades ago, he also underscored that the situations are not all identical; each is unique, in accordance with different geographical, historical, political, and cultural conditions. Claims that Iran is seeking to export its ideology or model of government to Egypt, he said, were dishonest attempts to keep the peoples of the region divided.

He went on to warn that the United States has recognized it cannot keep its pawns in power, so it will attempt to “move its pawns around” to preserve its hegemony and should not be trusted.²⁾

Sharp criticisms were leveled at Ayatollah Khamenei’s sermon in the West and by parts of the Arab media. Commentators attacked the idea that these movements constituted an “Islamic Awakening,” claiming they had nothing to do with religion. It was an “Arab Spring,” they intoned; the revolutionaries were looking to establish secular liberal democracies, not embrace “theocratic” rule. However, as time went by, it became clear that the Western political establishment, the mainstream Western media, and most Western “experts”-who had not anticipated the coming revolutions in the first place-were once again incapable of correctly understanding the situation in Egypt or correctly interpreting the broader region’s realities. Hence, their dismay with the results from the parliamentary elections in Egypt, in which the Muslim Brotherhood’s *Freedom and Justice* coalition and the Salafist *Noor* coalition together received over two thirds of the votes.³⁾ It is already apparent how the parliament that will emerge from these elections is likely to steer the process of drafting a new constitution for Egypt, if it is allowed to do so by the country’s U.S.-backed military.

The Western (or Western-affiliated) Middle East “experts,” who were previously so adamant that these revolutions were secular in nature, now wonder how to read unfolding events. Some put on a brave face, expressing hope that, after a few years, Islamic parties will fail

2) <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=10955>.

3) David Kirkpatrick, “Islamists Say They Have Mandate in Egypt Voting,” *New York Times*, November 3, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/01/world/middleeast/voting-in-egypt-shows-mandate-for-islamists.html>.

and people will vote for Western-oriented liberal parties-as if people in the region do not remember who backed and continues to back Arab dictatorships. They do not seem to recognize that the social, economic, and ultimately political crisis currently manifesting itself throughout Europe and the United States has already raised serious questions about the nature and future of liberal capitalism, especially in the Middle East and other non-Western parts of the world.

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

Indeed, if the Muslim Brotherhood does not meet popular expectations in the coming months and years, it is other religious groups including the Salafists who are likely to capitalize on this to expand their own influence over Egypt, not Western-style, secular liberals. The Salafists' strong electoral performance and substantial external funding positions them to declare, in the not-so-distant future, that it is time for "true Islam" to save the country. This is something that Western and even non-Western countries should be deeply concerned about, as the

ideologies of many of these Salafist groups have a great deal in common with those of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Of course, Americans and Europeans cannot complain about the Salafists' religious intolerance or their externally-backed rise to power, because they are heavily financed by the West's closest regional allies.

For reasons largely linked to self-preservation, Saudi Arabia and other Arab dictatorships in the Persian Gulf region are financing such extremist groups all over the Arab World and beyond. The increasingly unstable oil rich Arab dictatorships in the Persian Gulf are waging a counter-Revolution by funding extremists in order to prevent the winds of change from sweeping them from power, but this is leading to increasing instability in many parts of the world. As has already been seen, over the past three decades, by heavily funding extremist ideologies they have radically affected societies in significant parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan, creating a culture of intolerance and radically altering the local culture.

According to leaked documents on Wikileaks, Saudi Arabia is still the largest financial supporter of the Taliban.⁴⁾ In fact, almost all of the undemocratic Arab regimes in the Persian Gulf region are still funding the Taliban. This has always been an open secret in this part of the world. Indeed, not only are these states funding the Taliban, they are effectively funding the Taliban ideology, which has strong similarities to that of Al-Qaeda, throughout the world. Many wonder how Americans presume that their alliance with the Saudi regime is in the United States' long term interests. Is the spread of the Salafi ideology in

4) "Wikileaks: Saudis 'Chief Funders of Sunni Militants,'" *BBC News*, December 5, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-11923176>.

Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Horn of Africa, North Africa, Yemen, Europe, Iraq, Syria and elsewhere unrelated to the yearly multibillion dollar ideological investment by these regimes, led by the Saudis?

Ironically, despite these efforts, in many ways it is easier for Iran to establish meaningful and long-lasting ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and most other groups in Egypt than it is for the Arab regimes in the Persian Gulf. Despite religious differences, Iran and groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood have much in common regarding the issue of Palestine and both dislike the family dictatorships in the Arab world that are seen as U.S. client regimes. The Saudis, the United Arab Emirates and even the Qataris (despite providing funding), on the other hand have always been deeply suspicious of the Muslim Brotherhood and they fear that the Muslim Brotherhood “virus” will help weaken their own regimes. Hence, the Saudi’s increasing support for rapidly growing Salafi extremists (which is developing into a potentially much broader security threat for Europe than the Taliban or Al-Qaeda ever was) in order to counter the Muslim Brotherhood and other reformist movements. The UAE, meanwhile, is cracking down hard on internal critics and giving warnings about the threat of the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵⁾

Nevertheless-and notwithstanding the scorn directed at Ayatollah Khamenei’s observations over a year ago-this is looking very much like the manifestation of an Islamic Awakening. Many factors such as injustice, social inequality, despotism, and western domination contributed

5) Brian Murphy, “UAE Squeezes Islamist Group on Arab Spring Fringe,” *Boston.com*, May 7, 2012, http://articles.boston.com/2012-05-07/news/31612909_1_uae-islamist-group-al-khaimah.

to the recent events, but they do not at all contradict the idea of an awakening. For those who kept their eyes open, there were clear signs of this from the prevalence of Islamic slogans as well as the role of mosques and Friday prayers. Significantly, the term “Islamic Awakening” has been used by Ayatollah Khamenei in his public statements as leader nearly two hundred times over the past two decades.⁶⁾ He has repeatedly stated that Islamic movements are on the rise and that the region is heading for major changes that are, for the most part, in sharp conflict with Western interests. However, a major question is what the role of well-funded Wahabism and Salafist extremists in the awakening in the years ahead.

Unlike in the West, the Iranian leadership, along with others in the region, has expected these events for many years and is thus much better prepared than Europe and the United States to deal with this reality.⁷⁾ The Islamic Republic is rapidly expanding relations with rising political entities throughout the region. It recently held the *First International Islamic Awakening Conference*, with over seven hundred participants from a host of key regional movements. In the Conference’s Inaugural speech, Ayatollah Khamenei told attendees what he believed to be the principles and slogans of the revolutions: independence, freedom, the demand for justice, opposition to despotism and colonialism, the rejection of ethnic, racial, or religious discrimination, and the explicit rejection of Zionism. All of these, he said, are Islamic

6) <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-topic>.

7) Marandi, “The Islamic Republic of Iran, the United States, and the Balance of Power in the Middle East,” *The Race for Iran* blog, January 14, 2011, <http://www.raceforiran.com/the-islamic-republic-of-iran-the-united-states-and-the-balance-of-power-in-the-middle-east>.

values, based on the Qur'an.⁸⁾

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

From an Iranian perspective, this provides at least a partial explanation why the United States and the EU are now so explicit in their (so far unsuccessful) attempts to inflict severe pain on ordinary Iranians through "crippling" sanctions.⁹⁾ While, in the past, it was clear that the objective of sanctions was to make average Iranians suffer-as the Wikileaks cables confirm¹⁰⁾-there was at least a hypocritical attempt to portray these actions as humane and directed at the government. Now, the incessant and shrill calls to assassinate and murder Iranian scientists, military officials, and politicians and to launch military strikes on the country reveals the existence of a disturbed mentality among many of the political elite in the West and in the United

8) <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=17269>.

9) Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, "Iran Is Not About to Collapse," Comment Is Free, *The Guardian*, November 22, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/nov/22/iran-sanctions-economy-government> and Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, "The Fall of the Iranian Rial: Too Much of a Good Thing," *Tyranny of Numbers* blog, January 3, 2012, <http://djavad.wordpress.com/2012/01/03/the-fall-of-the-iranian-rial-too-much-of-a-good-thing/>.

10) "U/S Levey Encourages UK to Tighten Pressure on Iran," Wikileaks, January 8, 2009, <http://www.wikileaks.de/cable/2009/01/09LONDON50.html>.

States in particular. The recent flurry of absurd accusations made against Iran by the U.S., such as the so-called plot against the Saudi Ambassador to Washington, the rehashed IAEA report presented by a deeply biased director general, cyber attacks, and the attempts to impose sanctions on the Iranian central bank which even one of the candidates for the Republican nomination for President, Ron Paul, considers to be an act of war, is also leading many in Iran to conclude that the United States is currently too irrational for any form of meaningful dialogue.

The Russian Foreign Ministry noted that the November 2011 IAEA report “had a set goal to deliver a guilty verdict”,¹¹⁾ despite the fact that, as Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister elsewhere pointed out, there is absolutely no evidence whatsoever to show that Iran’s nuclear program is anything but peaceful.¹²⁾ That is why, contrary to the dominant narrative in the Western media, the majority of the “international community,” such as the 120 Non-Aligned Movement states, have consistently backed the Islamic Republic’s position on its nuclear program.¹³⁾

11) <http://rt.com/news/russia-iran-watchdog-nuclear-953/>.

12) Marandi, interview, *Press TV* website, October 13, 2011, <http://www.presstv.com/detail/204299.html>; Julian Borger, “Nuclear Wikileaks: Cables Show Cosy US Relationship with IAEA Chief,” Julian Borger’s Global Security Blog, *The Guardian*, November 30, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/julian-borger-global-security-blog/2010/nov/30/iaea-wikileaks>; Paul West, “Ron Paul: Sanctions against Iran Are ‘Acts of War,’” *Los Angeles Times*, November 29, 2011, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/dec/29/news/la-pn-ron-paul-sanctions-act-of-war20111229>; “Moscow Sees ‘No Military Component’ in Iran’s Nuclear Program,” Ria Novosti website, December 9, 2011, <http://en.rian.ru/world/20111209/169515956.html>.

13) Marandi, “Eurocentrism and Academic Imperialism,” *ZarCom Media Webletter*, October 27, 2011, <http://www.zarcommedia.com/index.php/research-documents/6691.html>.

Significantly, despite the fact that the IAEA is an undemocratic body dominated by the West and that, according to Wikileaks' documents, the current IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano is very much in the American camp and owes his position to the U.S. government, no real evidence has ever been provided showing that the Iranian nuclear program has a military component. Indeed, almost all the so called evidence against Iran comes from a laptop that Americans claim they obtained from within Iran a number of years ago that supposedly reveals Iran's "nuclear weapons ambitions." Iran has told the IAEA to have independent computer analysts check the computer to see if the material is authentic. Since the U.S. has consistently refuses to have the IAEA or even Western computer experts check the laptop and the particular computer file, it is clear to Iranians that the evidence is fabricated by western and Israeli intelligence sources.¹⁴⁾

Iranians also remember other cases of the American government's duplicity and dishonesty when President Lula of Brazil attempted to find a diplomatic solution to the refueling of the Tehran Research Reactor. The reactor, which each year produces medical isotopes for hundreds of thousands of dying cancer patients, was running out of nuclear fuel. Western governments were preventing it from being refueled in order to put pressure on Iran, effectively playing with the lives of hundreds of thousands of innocent people.¹⁵⁾ In April 2010,

14) Gareth Porter, "The Iran Nuclear 'Alleged Studies Documents: The Evidence of Fraud,'" *Middle East Policy* 17.4(2010), <http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/iran-nuclear-alleged-studies-documents>.

15) Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett, "Is the U.S. 'Offer' to Iran on Medical Isotopes a Pretext for More Coercive Action?" *The Race for Iran* blog,

Obama sent official letters to the Brazilian president and the Turkish Prime Minister stating the conditions that would have to be met for the United States to accept an agreement. When the conditions were met and Lula, Ahmadinejad, and Erdogan signed the Tehran Declaration, Obama shocked the three leaders by immediately rejecting it and pushing for a new UN Security Council resolution to increase sanctions against Iran. Not only did Obama lie to the Brazilian and Turkish leaders and publicly humiliate them, but it later became clear that his letters to them had been intentionally written to mislead both Brazil and Turkey.¹⁶⁾

It did not take long for history to repeat itself. In July 2011 the Russians put forth a new “step by step” proposal to resolve the nuclear issue. Senior Russian officials informed their Iranians counterparts that the proposal had the support of the United States and subsequently, despite reservations, the Iranians agreed in principle with the plan.¹⁷⁾ It later became clear to the Iranians that the Americans had misled the Russians too and that they did not actually accept the Russian proposal.¹⁸⁾ American actions make it reasonable for Iranians to conclude that the actual U.S. objective is for the nuclear issue not to be resolved and that the real problem for the United States is Iran’s opposition to and resistance against American hegemony. Contrary to

March 19, 2010, <http://www.raceforiran.com/is-the-u-s-%E2%80%98offer%E2%80%99-to-iran-on-medical-isotopes-a-pretext-for-more-coercive-action>.

- 16) “Why Should Iran Trust President Obama?” *The Race for Iran* blog, December 3, 2010, <http://www.raceforiran.com/why-should-iran-trust-president-obama>.
- 17) “Step by Step: Russia’s Plan to Bring Iran Back for Good,” RT website, August 17, 2001, <http://rt.com/politics/iran-approves-russian-nuclear/>.
- 18) http://irannuc.ir/fa/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1721:غریب‌رسمی‌مواضع‌مجموعه&catid=105:اوباما‌عملی‌امنیت‌مشاور

claims made in the west, Obama has never seriously attempted to engage with the Iranians on the basis of mutual respect.¹⁹⁾

It should be remembered that beginning in late 2003 and lasting for roughly two years, Iran did more than halt the enrichment of Uranium; it effectively halted almost the entire nuclear program and implemented the Additional Protocol.²⁰⁾ It allowed the IAEA to carry out intrusive inspections, many of which had nothing to do with the nuclear program and looked more like intelligence-gathering operations on behalf of the U.S. government. The fact that the International Atomic Energy Agency has not found any evidence whatsoever to show that Iran's nuclear program has ever been anything but peaceful yet continues to oppose Iran's nuclear program, is another reason why Iranians have little trust in western governments. U.S. relations with the Israeli regime, India, and Pakistan, which all have nuclear weapons, are strong-even though, in the case of Pakistan, for example, a weak central government has called into question the army's ability to prevent these weapons from falling into the hands of the Taliban or Taliban-like groups.

American leaders are deceiving themselves if they believe the cables, published by Wikileaks, that describe the hostility of a number of Arab leaders towards Iran and its nuclear program actually strengthen the U.S. position regarding Iran. In fact, these documents do the

19) Leverett and Leverett, "Giving 'Engagement' a Bad Name: Obama's Iran Policy at One Year," *Race for Iran* blog, January 22, 2010, <http://www.raceforiran.com/giving-%E2%80%9Cengagement%E2%80%9D-a-bad-name-obama%E2%80%99s-iran-policy-at-one-year>.

20) "Key Reasons against Sanctions and Military Intervention in Iran," Campaign Against Sanctions and Military Intervention in IRAN website, January 22, 2012, <http://www.campaigniran.org/casmii/index.php?q=node/12085>.

exact opposite, as they diminish these already unpopular despots in the eyes of their own people. This becomes clear when one looks at the 2010 Arab Public Opinion Poll, which reveals that a very strong majority of Arabs support Iran's nuclear program. In addition, the poll shows that, while 88 percent of Arabs view the Israeli regime as a threat and 77 percent view the United States as a threat, only 10 percent view the Islamic Republic of Iran as a threat (10 percent also viewed Algeria as a threat).²¹⁾

The irony is not lost upon Iranians that they have had to experience four rounds of sanctions, even though they have never produced Weapons of Mass Destruction. Yet the countries that have actually pushed for the sanctions-the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany-actually provided the greatest amount of help to Saddam Hussein with WMDs to use against Iranian civilians and combatants, as well as against the Iraqi people. In other words, these countries were deeply implicated in crimes against humanity; they compounded their complicity by preventing the UN Security Council from even declaring that Iraq had used such weapons, much less condemning it. Iran on the other hand, despite its capability, refused to produce or use such weapons. In fact, the Islamic Republic has, to this day, never produced chemical weapons, because it considers them inhumane. This by itself, Iranians regularly point out, is sufficient evidence that the Islamic Republic of Iran is honest when it states that it has no intention of acquiring nuclear weapons. As war veterans and civilians in Iran continue to die because of the WMDs provided to the former

21) <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2010/08/05-arab-opinion-poll-telhami>.

Iraqi regime by the West, it is an understatement to say that Iranians are angered by these governments' continued attempt to strangle the Iranian economy.

More recently, the extraordinary capture of the unmanned American stealth plane by the Iranian armed forces not only reveals the extent of Iranian military competence; it also exposes the extent of U.S. hostility towards Iran as well as its sheer disregard of international law, including Afghan sovereignty.²²⁾ What is the point of talking with the United States, Iranians ask themselves, when that country carried out such provocative acts of hostility with such total unaccountability and impunity?

Many in Iran feel that, to a large extent, the Syrian public has also been made the target of sanctions and foreign intervention because of the West's extraordinary hatred towards the Islamic Republic. In other words, Syrians must cease to earn a living, because their government, alongside Iran, stands in opposition to the Israeli regime's apartheid policies. From almost the start of the troubles in Syria, Iranians were aware that external forces were involved, notwithstanding repeated denials by Arab regimes in the Persian Gulf, Turkey, and Western countries. As time passed, this has become even clearer, despite unending media propaganda²³⁾ claiming that it is simply a struggle between unarmed street protestors and the Syrian army and intelligence

22) "US Spy Operations Will Continue," News24 website, December 14, 2011, <http://www.news24.com/World/News/U.S.-spy-operations-will-continue-20111214>.

23) Aisling Byrne, "A Mistaken Case for Syrian Regime Change," *Asia Times Online*, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/NA05Ak03.html and Sharmine Narwani, "Stratfor Challenges Narratives on Syria," The Blog, *Huffington Post*, December 19, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sharmine-narwani/stratfor-challenges-narra_b_1158710.html.

services.²⁴⁾ Indeed, the dictatorships of the Arab League even failed to force their own monitors in Syria to tow the official line and even a poll commissioned by the Doha Debates in Qatar, whose results have clearly been spun and completely ignored by the western media (and the BBC, who broadcasts the Debates), reveals that the majority of Syrians actually support Bashar Assad.²⁵⁾

There is no doubt that the foreign anti-Syrian alliance is responsible for arming groups, for the devastating car and suicide bombings, and, thus, for the many deaths-including the large number of sectarian murders, largely ignored in the Western media-that have occurred as a result. When American officials and the Western media speak of Syrian brutality and constantly repeat unsubstantiated casualty figures presented by western-funded Syrian NGOs, it would be good for them to recall how many tens, if not hundreds of thousands of innocent people in Iraq were killed during the insurgency against U.S. occupation.²⁶⁾ The regular killing of civilians in Afghanistan and the regular drone attacks in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia among other countries are, of course, ongoing tragedies.

Iran believed that the Syrian president should have been given a chance to carry out the reforms which were promised, but that from

24) Alastair Crooke, "Syria and Iran: The Great Game," Comment Is Free, *The Guardian*, November 4, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/nov/04/syria-iran-great-game>.

25) "Post: Most Syrians Supportive of Assad," PressTV website, December 31, 2011, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/218712.html> and "Most Syrians Supportive of Assad," *Gulf Times*, December 30, 2011, http://www.gulf-times.com/site/topics/article.asp?cu_no=2&item_no=478192&version=1&template_id=36&parent_id=16.

26) Byrne, "A Mistaken Case," and "Syrian NGOs: A Dual-Use Technology?" RT website, December 11, 2011, <http://rt.com/news/syrian-ngo-western-support-755/>.

the start, Western governments and Arab dictatorships were adamant that reforms should not succeed under Bashar Assad. Hence, they attempted to overrun the legitimate internal opposition with an external one that backs Western military intervention.²⁷⁾ While the Islamic Republic was critical of the treatment of peaceful protestors with legitimate grievances by Syrian security forces, Iranians knew that, unlike other Arab regimes, President Assad had and continues to have significant popular support. His stance against the Israeli regime, his support for resistance groups, and the fact that unlike other Arab leaders he lives a relatively normal lifestyle, gives him much more street credibility than Saudi, Jordanian, Bahraini, Yemeni, or Egyptian rulers.²⁸⁾ On multiple occasions in recent months, enormous crowds have taken to the streets in simultaneous pro-Assad demonstrations in major Syrian cities; in contrast, none of the Arab dictators-including his current antagonists-have ever been able to muster such public support for themselves. Indeed, Iran believes that this is the main reason why cruel sanctions have been imposed on Syria: they are meant to do nothing but hurt the general public and cause discontent among the population. President Assad's foreign adversaries recognize that he has significant popular support; hence, the Syrian people must be punished until this support is diminished.

As in Gaza and Iran, the goal is to punish people for backing

27) Ibrahim al-Amin, "Time for a Rethink in Syria," Alakbahr English website, December 22, 2011, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/time-rethink-syria>.

28) Bashar al-Assad, interview with Andrew Gilligan, "Syria's President Assad: 'I Live a Normal Life - It's Why I'm Popular,'" *The Telegraph*, October 30, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/8857883/Syrias-President-Assad-I-live-a-normal-life-its-why-Im-popular.html>.

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

In an extraordinary *Wall Street Journal* interview, the pro-Western Syrian National Council’s spokesman, Burhan Ghalioun, revealed clearly where things stand. He effectively said that if the Syrian state is overthrown, the new regime would relinquish the Resistance against Israel and would move politically towards the “principal Arab powers,” meaning the current Arab dictatorships.²⁹⁾ Therefore, while there is no doubt that the Syrian government has major deficiencies and that excessive force has been used by army soldiers and security service members, leading to the deaths of innocent people, Iranians do not believe that the U.S.-, EU-, Qatari- and Saudi-led attempts for regime change in Damascus are being carried out for the sake of freedom or democracy. If only for self-preservation, these absolute monarchies will, with the aid of their Western backers, try to deter any meaningful move towards democracy near their borders, at all costs. Hence, the

29) <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203833104577071960384240668.html>
and <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/revolution-against-resistance>.

continued U.S. support for the Jordanian king, the Egyptian military, the Yemeni regime, the Saudi family and the occupation of Bahrain, as well as the Al-Khalifa dictatorship among others.³⁰⁾ The United States has a policy of deterring democracy in the region, so why should anyone believe they have a sincere interest in freedom for Syrians?

There is evidence indicating the United States has been viewing sectarianism as a potential tool for weakening its adversaries for quite some time now.³¹⁾ This fits well with the current situation in Syria. The fact that Turkey, which seems to be showing Neo-Ottoman tendencies, has allowed Abdulhakim Belhadj (who was close to both the al-Qaeda leadership and the Taleban) to meet with leaders of the so called “Free Syrian Army” in Istanbul and on the border with Turkey is mind boggling.³²⁾ In addition, Salafi clerics close to the insurgency repeatedly incite religious, racial, and sectarian violence, such as the well-known Saudi cleric Saleh Al-Luhaidan, who said a third of the Syrian population should be killed so that the rest could live.³³⁾ The Syrian Salafi cleric Sheikh Muhammad Badi’ Moussa has also said it is permissible to kill Alawite women and children.³⁴⁾ The foreign-backed

30) M. K. Bhadrakumar, “Tharir Square Unnerves US, Turkey,” *Indian Punchline* blog, November 21, 2011, <http://blogs.rediff.com/mkbhadrakumar/2011/11/21/tahrir-square-unnerves-us-turkey/>; Marandi, “The American Misreading.

31) Narwani, “Pentagon Game to Divide Iranians and Arbas,” *Salon*, October 26, 2011, http://www.salon.com/writer/sharmine_narwani/.

32) Ruth Sherlock, “Leading Libyan Islamist Met Free Syrian Army Opposition Group,” *The Telegraph*, November 27, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8919057/Leading-Libyan-Islamist-met-Free-Syrian-Army-opposition-group.html>.

33) Crooke, “The Syrian Paradox,” *Asia Times Online*, July 15, 2011, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/MG15Ak02.html.

34) <http://www.memritv.org/clip/en/0/0/0/207/0/3376.htm>.

extremists even murdered the son of the Syria's Grand Sunni Mufti, just as their allies killed many Sunni clerics and sheikhs in the Anbar province in Iraq.³⁵⁾ Meanwhile, the al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri himself has supported the violence in Syria.³⁶⁾

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

In any case, despite American attempts to preserve the old order, the region is rapidly changing. This has enormous implications for the Islamic Republic, the United States, and Israel. There is no doubt that future political orders in Egypt and Tunisia will, to say the least, be highly critical of Zionism. It is also quite possible to imagine the rise of radically different political orders in the future in countries like Jordan. As a result, Iran will no longer be an isolated voice in

35) "Son of Syria's Grand Mufti Dies of His Wounds," *The People's Daily Online*, October 3, 2011, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90777/90854/7609900.html>.

36) <http://jihadology.net/2012/02/11/as-sa%E1%B8%A5ab-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-al-qaidahs-dr-ayman-al-%E1%BA%93awahiri-onward-oh-lions-of-syria/> and <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/dr-ayman-al-elba93awc481hirc4ab-22onward-oh-lions-of-syria22-en.pdf>.

its opposition to Israeli apartheid. This alone will be a major breakthrough for the Islamic Republic, since it will significantly decrease Western pressure on the country. Ongoing events in Yemen also have the potential to help bring about major change in the Persian Gulf region, especially after the roles that the United States, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and others have played to preserve the current regime. In the midst of all this, oil-rich countries to the north of the Islamic Republic are also beginning to show signs of instability.

The general belief in Iran is that if the Saudis fall, all of the Arab dictatorships in the Persian Gulf will fall too. Iranians believe that what is going on in the Middle East and North Africa is far too complex for the Saudis and Qataris, whose regimes both officially follow Wahabism, to control and that the money that they are spending is actually fueling the flames more than anything else. Iranians don't believe that the Saudi, UAE, and Qatari regimes are very sophisticated and that this has manifested itself in their failure in Syria. They are unpopular among the revolutionaries in Yemen, Bahrain, and Egypt and now they have for altogether different reasons made powerful enemies in Syria and Iraq. Indeed, the rapidly growing alliance between Iran and Iraq has already shifted the balance of power in the region significantly.

In addition, there are millions of poor workers from Yemen, Egypt and other places living under poor conditions in Saudi Arabia and the vast majority of those who live in the UAE and Qatar are foreigners, most of them are effectively indentured servants or slaves from poor countries. Hence, the Arab rulers are not simply concerned about their own "subjects" and angry neighbors. The slightest sign of

weakness in any of these regimes will have major consequences.

Regarding Israel, it is important to note that, contrary to Western propaganda, no Iranian leader has at any point advocated the dismantling of Israel through military annihilation. Despite the often willful distortion of the Iranian President's words in the Western media, the Islamic Republic's position has consistently been that Israel, like apartheid South Africa, is a colonial entity entitling a particular group of "chosen people" exceptional rights while denying those rights to the majority of the native population, thereby leaving the regime without any legitimacy. Iran's stance against Israel is based on what it sees to be an important moral principle.³⁷⁾ The Islamic Republic followed the same principle in its opposition to apartheid South Africa, at a time when Western countries backed the regime. From the Iranian perspective, the only way for the Palestinian issue to be resolved is for the Zionist ideology to be relinquished, so that Muslims, Christians, and Jews can live as equals in the land of Palestine. If the Palestinian people as a whole, including refugees, come to an agreement with Israel, the Islamic Republic would respect the Palestinian decision and refrain from interference. Nevertheless, on moral grounds it will not recognize the Israeli regime as legitimate. Of course, the extremist ideologies promoted by wealthy Arab dictatorships have a very different view of religious diversity and coexistence.

The claim that the Islamic Republic is somehow a military threat is not only dishonest, but the reverse of reality. The United States

37) Marandi, "Ayatollah Khamenei and a Principled Foreign Policy," *Conflicts Forum*, June 28, 2011, <http://conflictsforum.org/2011/ayatollah-khamenei-and-a-principled-foreign-policy/>.

and Israel, along with other Western countries have repeatedly made military threats against the Iranian people, while the Iranians have never made threats of their own. Of course, Iranians believe that an attack on Iran is unlikely, because even senior American leaders admit that the consequences would be highly detrimental to the United States and its interests.³⁸⁾ However, the mere threats themselves are seen as inhuman and irrational; because of such behavior by America, Iran has prepared itself for any potential American miscalculation. Ayatollah Khamenei recently stated that, while Iran will never carry out aggression, from now on the Islamic Republic will respond to threats with threats.³⁹⁾ Iranians firmly believe that stability or instability from the Mediterranean to the borders of India is inextricably linked to peace and stability in the Persian Gulf region. A look at a map makes clear that Iran has the ability to respond to threats throughout the region and beyond. If there is no security for Iranians or for Iranian oil exports, then, in Iranian eyes, there will be no security for Iran's antagonists in the region.⁴⁰⁾ Under such conditions, the United States and its allies should not expect oil or gas to flow out of the Persian Gulf, northern Iraq, or Central Asia. It would be a grave mistake to underestimate the Islamic Republic's military power and resolve as well as the region's popular response to yet another Western act of aggression in a very unstable region.

Hence, in the eyes of many in Iran it is in the interest of the

38) Leon E. Panetta, Remarks at the Saban Center, December 2, 2011, transcription at *U.S. Department of Defense* website, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4937>.

39) <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=17868>.

40) <http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/214501/داد-نفت-را-افزایش-داد>.

declining Western powers to take a more rational approach towards regional issues and a more reasonable approach towards the Islamic Republic. Any attempt to hurt or humiliate Iranians will simply harden Iran's stance and have an opposite effect, whereas reason and respect can lead to a solution acceptable to all sides. As things stand; however, the Islamic Republic has no option but to make conditions more difficult for the United States and its allies in the Persian Gulf region. The recent parliamentary elections in Iran too have shown that the U.S. continues to misread the country, by repeatedly threatening the country and by portraying the political order as unpopular, undemocratic, and lacking legitimacy.

The turnout on the Friday, 2 March 2012 elections was very high, at around 64 percent.⁴¹⁾ In fact, the turnout in Iran was much higher than in analogous off-year congressional elections in the United States (for example, turnout was just under 38 percent in the 2010 American congressional elections), and higher even than in U.S. presidential elections (turnout was just under 57 percent in the last American presidential election, in 2008). The fact that President Ahmadinejad's sister participated and lost by a small margin, that many independents won seats, that reformist candidates stood for seats, and that there were numerous "principlist" coalitions taking part in the elections (e.g., *Jebheye Motahed*, *Jebheye Paydari*, *Jebheye Eestadegi*, *Sedaye Mellat*, each with a different list of candidates) and that many independents won seats shows that the elections were meaningful. There was a broad choice of candidates and the counting process is trustworthy and reliable.

41) <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9012151139>.

The decisions of former Presidents Khatami and Rafsanjani to participate, along with other reformists like Majeed Ansari, Seyed Mehdi Emam Jamarani, Kazam Mousavi Bojnourdi, and Ayatollah Khomeini's grandson Hassan Khomeini, reflect this. If they had serious questions about the electoral process, why would they vote and increase the "legitimacy" of the voting process and of the election results? If turnout had been low and public enthusiasm lacking, why would they want to be seen standing apart from the majority who did not vote?

In fact, they knew that turnout was going to be high; they also recognized that such high turnout shows that the public trusts the voting process, that people feel their votes count, and that they are deeply committed to the Islamic Republic. By casting their ballots these reformist leaders have stated that they accept the accuracy, validity, and legitimacy of the voting process and that they have no link to the western backed "greens." If they believed the results were unreliable, why would they vote, thereby strengthening a "corrupt" system? Instead, they have effectively stated that they do not accept claims that the 2009 presidential election or any previous presidential election was fraudulent, even though the voting process has not changed. Merely through their participation, they have given the voting process a clear vote of confidence.

Other major reformists who campaigned to win seats had different calculations. People like Mostafa Kavakebian (who lost), Mohammad Reza Khabaz (who lost), Masoud Pezeshkian (who won), and Mohammad Reza Tabesh (who won) wanted a high turnout from the very start. While they are Reformists, they wanted a display of unity and strength among Iranians against what is widely seen in Iran as Western acts

of war against ordinary Iranians through embargos and sanctions. Indeed, there is evidence from polls and follow-up panels that the publication on election day in Iran of President Barack Obama's interview, in which he proclaimed "I don't bluff" in the context of a military attack on the Islamic Republic, may have driven up turnout, at least in Tehran, among those who might otherwise have stayed home.⁴²⁾

Most of the Western so-called reporting on the Islamic Republic's recent parliamentary election as usual displayed very limited direct knowledge about Iran and often, derived their information primarily from Western-backed opponents of the Islamic Republic. As long as this goes on, Western countries will continue to miscalculate the Islamic Republic's internal politics and foreign policy-and then be left wondering, again and again, why they (the West) always get things wrong.

It is in the interest of Western reporters as well as so-called "Iran experts" in Western countries who consistently distort reality inside Iran to behave more responsibly. Their constant caricature of Iranian society as well as their unfounded claims of fraud in the 2009 presidential elections, have largely served the interests of unwise advocates of confrontation within the United States who need to "delegitimize" the Islamic Republic in the eyes of the American public.⁴³⁾ Iranians know quite well that a country engaged in perpetual war-where even establishment

42) Jeffrey Goldberg, "Obama to Iran and Israel: 'As President of the United States, I Don't Bluff,'" *The Atlantic*, March 2, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/obama-to-iran-and-israel-as-president-of-the-united-states-i-dont-bluff/253875/>.

43) <http://www.campaigniran.org/casmii/index.php?q=node/9757> and <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=33663> and "Ahmadinejad; Duly Elected President of Iran," *Middle East Online*, August 11, 2009, <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/bmiddleeastnafricara/652.php>.

figures such as Helen Thomas, Rick Sanchez, and Octavia Nasr are silenced, where academics are denied tenure for their political views,⁴⁴⁾ where people are imprisoned for making television channels like Al-Manar available to the public,⁴⁵⁾ where verbal support for Hezbollah can get you investigated,⁴⁶⁾ and where innocent citizens are regularly harassed by the FBI and IRS or arrested on trumped-up charges, simply because they are anti-war, anti-Wall Street or because of their sympathy for Palestinians, Lebanon, or Iran⁴⁷⁾-has little right to speak about Iran. Those who do so anyway should at least have the decency to wait until the last Iranian gas victim dies.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is prepared to continue without relations with the United States in the years to come, and more and more young Iranians and businessmen are looking to Asia and countries like China, India, Brazil, Russia, and South Africa for higher education, business, and trade. Hence, the Iranians have no need to stall in any negotiations nor are they in a rush. The message from Tehran has been consistent and it has been quite clear during the nuclear talks. As an independent country Iran wants nothing more than the rights it has within the framework of the NPT and it will accept nothing less.

44) Jennifer Howard, "The Chronicle of Higher Ed: A Reliable Source," Official Website of Norman G. Finkelstein, <http://www.normanfinkelstein.com/the-chronicle-of-higher-ed-a-reliable-source/>.

45) Pierre Tristam, "Absurd Prison Sentence for New Yorker over Hezbollah TV," *About.com*, April 25, 2009 <http://middleeast.about.com/b/2009/04/25/absurd-prison-sentence-for-new-yorker-over-hezbollah-tv.htm>.

46) "Counter-Terrorism Official: No Hizballah Training Camps in Metro Detroit," *Detroit Free Press*, April 24, 2012, <http://www.freep.com/article/20120424/NEWS06/120424070/Counter-terrorism-official-No-Hizballah-training-camps-in-metro-Detroit?odyssey=tab|topnews|text|FRONTPAGE>.

47) <http://www.freeseeyedmousavi.com/> (this website details one such story).

If anything, it is Western countries that have been stalling. If they honestly accept Iran's rights in deeds rather than words, with the help of creative thinking, many issues such as the nuclear issue can be resolved. However, if they want to continue to "punish" Iran and force Iran to submit to their demands and humiliate the country, the talks will fail and the declining Western powers will be hurt at least as much as they hurt Iran. Indeed, as things stand, Western countries are simply empowering their rivals such as the Chinese, the Russians, the Indians, and the Brazilians among others, as such countries are rapidly replacing Western countries as Iran's trading partners and they are strengthening their ties with Iran at all levels.

Of course, even talk of an attack by Western government officials on Iran is illegal and barbaric, just like the sanctions on Iran's central bank and oil sector are inhumane. However, as pointed out, the Islamic Republic of Iran, is quite capable of defending itself and any attack on the country by Western powers would ultimately lead to the destruction of all oil and gas installations in the Persian Gulf, the sinking of all oil tankers, and the halt of oil and gas exports not only from the Persian Gulf, but from northern Iraq and probably much of Central Asia. It would, to say the least, seriously destabilize all Western-backed and unpopular dictatorships in the Arab world, to say the least, and world public opinion would blame aggressive Western regimes for the subsequent global economic meltdown. Even reopening the Strait of Hormoz during conflict would be of no use, as there would be nothing to pass through it.

Western regimes should ask whether their own current political order is capable of surviving the wrath of their own people if they carry out

such a crime against humanity with such horrific consequences for the global economy. As things stand, most Iranian political analysts believe that Western governments have more than enough problems dealing with the current and deepening economic crisis and that the only rational way forward is for the international community to put pressure on the United States and its allies to adopt a more rational approach to the Islamic Republic of Iran as well as to the region at large.

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Abstract

Iranian Views on the Awakening, the Crisis in Europe, and the Future of the United States in the Middle East

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Many Iranian analysts believe that since the Iranian Revolution much of western attitudes and policy towards the Islamic Republic have been irrational, aggressive, and founded upon a mythological construction. It is also widely believed that over the past few years this hostility has intensified to a point where western actions against the Iranian economy can be interpreted as acts of war. The uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa have so far served to intensify this hostility, as the crisis-hit West fears its hegemony over this strategic part of the world is on the decline. In line with Iranian predictions, Islamic groups critical of the United States and its western allies are on the rise across the board. However, as western powers construct their regional policies through an anti-Iranian lens, they have largely ignored the extensive funding of groups ideologically similar to Al Qaeda and the Taleban by the Arab regimes in the Persian Gulf. The increasingly unstable oil rich Arab dictatorships are waging a counter-Revolution by funding extremists in order to prevent the winds of change from sweeping them from power. However, it is widely believed that this is leading to increasing instability throughout the region and beyond.

Key Words

Islamic Awakening, Arab Spring, Islamic Republic of Iran, Persian Gulf, Al Qaeda, Israel