

Nov 04, 2016 by **Javad Rad**

Worrisome Revolutions in the Middle East ^[1]

The Middle East is once again on fire, not because of American warfare, but due to apparently genuine movements aiming to get rid of old rulers and obsolete political systems. Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, and Yemen have all either passed the threshold of revolution or are on the verge. The dominos have fallen and it would not be imprudent to call it a day for rulers in other Arab countries like Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, or Jordan.

These political earthquakes are shaking not only the region but also the whole world. These events affect the lives of people in many countries, especially when the oil price jumps to unprecedented levels. But perhaps the most ardent followers of these events live in Washington, Tehran, and Tel Aviv. The United States government, a long time ally to almost all these rulers, was, and remains, in a real dilemma. The Obama administration does not dislike democracy but also yearns to maintain its good relation with the Arab rulers, especially when the U.S. has a troubling image in the Arab street. The behavioral template for Washington is simple: first, call for stability in the early stages of protests, encourage negotiations in the next stage, then change position and swing into supporting people's right for peaceful dissent if they seem to be serious, and finally, only support the transition of power when situations become violent and really out of control. This is not a unique and coherent policy especially when democracy promotion is often mentioned to be a priority for the U.S foreign policy (e.g. in the case of Iran), however, this policy seems to be the best option that Obama has for now (besides standing by and watching the events unfold before Washington's eyes).

Israel, fearing revolutionary wrath, has decided to keep a low profile in such a fluid situation and only play its very limited cards behind the scenes.

Iran, on the other hand, has been more than clear in supporting the revolutionaries. Oddly, both the government and the opposition have rejoiced over every successful popular uprising in the region. Iran's Supreme Leader has called these changes the sign of a great "Islamic awakening" meaning that Muslims in the Middle East are waking up to stand against tyrant rulers and consequently "arrogant powers" of the world. Iran believes that if real democracy prevails over the region, the Muslim Middle East will turn into a unified entity against the interventionist policies of the West.

And let's not forget Palestine. In the eyes of most Iranians, the demise of the Western-friendly monarchies would unleash pro-Palestinian sentiments, fortify Iran's soft power against Israel, and be another step forward for a free Palestine. The passage of two Iranian warships through the Suez Canal and their entrance into the Mediterranean Sea is, in fact, a significant move for Iran which would have been quite unlikely if, for example, Mubarak was still in power in Egypt. Likewise, the revolution in Libya is putting tangible pressure on the oil market and the number one beneficiary seems to be Iran again with selling its (supposedly sanctioned) oil more freely.

What makes the case of Iran more interesting is that it does not show any fear of the fire in its neighbor's house. While the reformist camp, still holding a grudge against the government over the results of 2009 election and its aftermath, tries to connect its protests to the Arab uprisings, the Iranian government tends to resurrect the discourse of 1979 revolution, and once again seems to be winning. It was in mid-February that Mousavi and Karroubi tried, unsuccessfully, to revive the "green movement" by calling upon their supporters to take to the streets. I call it a shock to a patient in coma which helped very little. The February move even brought about the criticism of some well-known figures like Hashemi Rafsanjani who is considered to be sympathetic towards the greens, as well as open calls for the execution of Mousavi and Karroubi. Iranian government, on the other hand, has been successful in taking hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of its supporters to the streets last February 11th to commemorate the 32nd anniversary of the Islamic revolution. If we take street protests at face value (this is, at least, the present criteria for the West), it seems that the moment for the green movement is gone.

The Middle East revolutions seem to happen one after another, no matter the position of countries like the U.S., Israel, or Iran. What is important is the future path for these worrisome revolutions. While the United States and Israel are very much concerned over the impact of these revolutions over their national security and interest, Iran is more than confident that its stance and position will only be fortified.
