



Volume 6, Number 12

June 27, 2012

The Syrian Uprising: The View from Tehran

Annie Tracy Samuel

The increasingly violent and bloody confrontation between Bashar Assad's regime and opposition forces, now 15 months old, has generated much concern in Iran, on two counts. First, the collapse of the regime would be a significant blow to Iran's strategic interests. Syria has been one of the Islamic Republic's closest and most important allies from the moment of the Shah's overthrow in 1979, and the fall of the Assad regime would seriously affect Iran's ability to project power into the eastern Mediterranean-Levant region. Second, and less noticed by Western analysts, is that the events in Syria stand in polar opposition to Iran's narrative of the Arab Spring uprisings as an "Islamic Awakening" inspired by Iran's own 1979 Islamic Revolution. Hence, it threatens not only the viability of that narrative, but the Iranian authorities' use of that narrative to justify their own rule.

Part of the reason for Syria's importance to Iran is its strategic position vis-à-vis Israel. With Syria's help, Iran has been able to extend its influence throughout the Levant, particularly by supporting and arming the Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian groups. Iran's ability to shape events in the region is both a source and symbol of its strategic power. Ali Larijani, the speaker of Iran's parliament, has described "Palestine's freedom" as being "at the center of Iran's strategic policies."¹ Ali Akbar Velayati, a former foreign minister and currently a senior advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i, emphasized on one occasion that Syria is "the golden ring" in the "chain of resistance against Israel."²

Iranian leaders have acknowledged that regime change in Syria could affect its local allies and overall strategic posture. “We are worried about the resistance against Israel,” said Asad Zarei, an Iranian political analyst. “If the changes in Syria happen in a way that the resistance is undermined, we are very worried.”³

Reflecting that concern, Iran has provided substantial support to the Assad regime since the beginning of the Syrian uprising. According to American and European officials, members of Syrian opposition groups and others, Iran is providing material support—shipments of light weapons, ammunition, and other military equipment, technology that can be used to block and monitor internet and mobile phone communications, and riot control gear—to the Syrian government to assist in the crackdown. Several rounds of sanctions on the individuals and organizations involved in these efforts have been imposed by the United States and the European Union.

Iran has also been accused of advising Syrian leaders on “best practices” for suppressing the protests, an area in which it has a fair amount of experience. According to members of the Syrian opposition, Iran has sent advisers, security officials and intelligence operatives to Syria. Qassem Suleimani, the leader of Iran’s powerful Revolutionary Guards’ Quds Force, is said to have directly overseen this effort, including visiting Syria to advise Assad. There have also been reports that Iranian paramilitary forces are present in Syria and are participating in the crackdown on protesters.

Iran has repeatedly denied accusations of any such involvement, terming them “ridiculous” and “unfounded,” and intended to create “a negative atmosphere around Iran.”⁴

While it is difficult to determine the extent and nature of Iran’s involvement in Syria from the information that is publicly available, it is reasonable to assume that Iran is indeed aiding the Assad regime, given Iran’s overriding interest in its survival.

Still, it is not clear if Iranian forces are actually present in Syria. Members of the Syrian opposition “acknowledge [that] they have little hard evidence that Iranians are actually participating in the offensives.”⁵ As for the value of Iran’s support, a US

official stated some months ago that Iranian aid to Assad was “important but not really a game changer in the overall conflict.”⁶

Iran’s denials of involvement are coupled with consistent accusations that other outside parties, primarily the United States, Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are fueling the Syrian uprising. Iranian officials and media often report that the majority of the peaceful Syrian protesters are actually expressing their support for Assad, while those fighting against the regime represent Western-backed groups who are trying “to divide the Syrian nation,” topple the regime and “break the Iranian-led axis of resistance against Israel.”⁷ Syrian government insistence that the violence is the work of “outlaws, saboteurs, and armed terrorist groups” orchestrated from abroad is repeated verbatim by Tehran.⁸

Iran’s warnings against foreign interference in Syria not only reflect Iran’s interest in seeing Assad remain in power, but also Iran’s fear of the precedent that foreign intervention in Syria might set. Talk of a NATO campaign to aid the opposition in Syria, particularly in the wake of last year’s NATO air campaign that proved decisive in toppling the Qaddafi regime in Libya, raises fears among Iranian leaders that a similar campaign might be launched against them.

Iran’s continuing support for Assad has not come without costs. It has put Tehran at odds with nearly every Middle Eastern government, particularly Saudi Arabia and Turkey, as well as the EU and the US. It has also tarnished Iran’s narrative of the Arab Spring as an Islamic Awakening inspired by Iran’s own Islamic Revolution. According to this narrative, one marketed extensively in Iran, in expressing opposition to their leaders, Tunisian, Egyptian, Bahraini and Libyan protestors were rejecting not only their own autocratic leaders but also America’s predominant position in the Middle East, Israeli hegemony, and secularism—all tenets that remain central to the Islamic Republic’s worldview.

To be sure, those uprisings did not neatly fit the mold into which Iran was trying to force them. Nonetheless, Iran’s characterization of them was sufficiently connected to reality so as to allow Iran to benefit from it, domestically and regionally. Moreover, Iran’s interests were in fact served by the toppling of the Egyptian,

Tunisian and Libyan regimes. However, the Syrian uprising, emanating from the country's Sunni majority against its Alawi (proto-Shi'i) rulers, threatens to irrevocably mar Tehran's grand narrative; hence, Tehran's insistence that the violence in Syria is the work of foreign, malevolent hands.

Though the inconsistency of Iranian support for popular protest everywhere but Syria (and Iran itself) is apparent, it is hardly remarkable. Throughout the last 18 months of tumultuous events in the region, governments have struggled to calibrate their interests and align them with the values and beliefs used to justify their actions.

However, in Iran's case, the challenge is now particularly daunting, and fraught with serious implications. For while the fall of the Assad regime would be a significant blow to Iran's ability to project power in the region, the damage done to its Islamic Awakening narrative might be even greater. The inability of Iran's leaders to martial the ideological tenets of that narrative—Islamic values, Iranian independence, opposition to Western influence in the region, support for the fight against Israel—would represent a severe blow to the Islamic Republic itself.

¹ IRNA, "Imam's resistance against Israel has entered new stage," Jun. 6, 2012. <http://tinyurl.com/d8ddp5y>.

² Mehr News, "The chain of resistance against Israel is carried out on the Syrian highway," Dec. 30, 2011. <http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1496800>.

³ Borzou Daragahi, "Syria in chaos sends shivers in region," *Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 26, 2011. <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/apr/26/world/la-fg-syria-neighbors-20110427>.

⁴ ISNA, "Iran rejects claims on troops dispatch to Syria for crackdown," May 21, 2011. <http://old.isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-1772048&Lang=E>. Press TV, "Iran slams EU sanctions on IRGC Cmdrs." Jun. 26, 2011. <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/186345.html>.

⁵ Joby Warwick and Liz Sly, "U.S. officials: Iran is stepping up lethal aid to Syria," *The Washington Post*, Mar. 3, 2012. http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-officials-iran-is-stepping-up-lethal-aid-to-syria/2012/03/02/gIQA9R9XpR_story.html.

⁶ Mark Hosenball, "Iran helping Assad to put down protests – officials," Reuters, Mar. 23, 2012. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/23/iran-syria-crackdown-idUSL1E8EK8AV20120323>.

⁷ Mehr News, "Iran, Hezbollah are on Syria side: Velayati," Feb. 23, 2012. <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1541898>; Press TV, "Protests for reforms continue in Syria," Apr. 1, 2011. <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/172655.html>; Mehr News, "Iran, Hezbollah are on Syria side: Velayati," Feb. 23, 2012. <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1541898>

⁸ Fars News, "Iran Condemns Foreign Interference in Syria," Jan. 20, 2012. <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9010171825>.

Annie Tracy Samuel is a junior researcher at the Alliance Center for Iranian Studies and the Moshe Dayan Center and is a PhD candidate in the Graduate School of History at Tel Aviv University. She is also a pre-doctoral research fellow at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs in the International Security Program and the Dubai Initiative.

This edition of Tel Aviv Notes was published with the cooperation of the Alliance Center for Iranian Studies at Tel Aviv University.

The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.

To republish an article in its entirety or as a derivative work, you must attribute it to the author and the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, and include a reference and hyperlink to the original article on the Moshe Dayan Center's website
<http://www.dayan.tau.ac.il>.

Previous editions of TEL AVIV NOTES can be accessed at www.dayan.org, under "Commentary."

You are subscribed to the Moshe Dayan Center Electronic Mailing List. Should you wish to unsubscribe, please send an email to listserv@listserv.tau.ac.il, with the message "unsubscribe dayan-center."