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### ARAB SPRING: GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR IRAN

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#### ABSTRACT

*This article sets out to examine the geopolitical implications of the Arab Spring for Iran. It hypothesizes that in spite of the initial short-term benefits of the Arab Spring, in the long-term it has transformed into an acute challenge for Iran. Developments in Bahrain, Egypt, and Syria-- thanks to their prominent positions in Iran's foreign policy apparatus-- have contributed to serious friction between Iran and other regional rivals, namely Saudi Arabia, Israel and Turkey. The Arab Spring seems to have given rise to an Iranian Autumn.*

**Key Words:** Arab Spring, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey

#### INTRODUCTION

When a 26-year-old Tunisian man, Mohamed Bouazzi, lit himself on fire in front of a local municipal office on 17 December, 2010, in Sidi Bouzid, it is unlikely he knew that he would spark a revolution. "The Jasmine Revolution," as it was called, set off waves of agitation across the Arab world. Bouazzi's self-immolation indeed unleashed political forces that became the origin of historic political changes which former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice referred to as the "birth pangs of the new Middle East". Though "the awakening of Arab youth" was inspired by dominant economic circumstances such as corruption, rampant unemployment, inflation, poverty, devastated living standards and the self-enrichment of the ruling family, the core of these upheavals has been demand for political reforms and movement towards democratization. Under the long-

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term rule of despotic governments, the Arab public has been suffering from a variety of social maladies. These include a lack of basic human rights, political freedom, an independent judiciary, activity of oppositional parties, and fair and free elections, as well as political discrimination. According to Khalaf (2011) “While economic frustrations have driven the outcry, political demands for freedom and democracy and a clamour for accountable government have been dominant.[...] From the Ben Ali family of Tunisia to the Mubaraks of Egypt, from Libya’s Gaddafi clan to Yemen’s Salehs and Syria’s Assads, the youth revolts have targeted long-resented monopoly rule.”

The political upheavals in the Arab world have had critical implications for some regional countries such as Iran. Some have concluded that Iran would be “the main beneficiary” of regional instability (Bajoria, 2011; Slackman, 2011; Barzegar, 2011), due to “the downfall of pro-US Arab regimes in the region, an emboldened Arab public angry at Israel and hostile to US foreign policy, and growing assertiveness of Shiites” (Bajoria, 2011). They claim that such events in the Arab World have shifted the “balance of power” in favour of Iran and strengthened its position in the region. Iran itself also regards the recent development as an “Islamic Awakening”, which is a victory for the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and as well believes that the Arab countries are walking in its “proverbial footsteps”. In this respect, the Iranian leader Ayatollah Khamenei even termed these uprisings “divine blessings” with “Islamic objectives and orientation”. Mahmud Ahmadinejad, Iran’s president, also claimed that the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions were inspired by Iran’s “defiance” against Western powers.

With regard to the regional developments, however, the present paper hypothesizes that despite initial short-term opportunities brought on by the Arab Spring for the Iranian regime, it has been transformed into a critical challenge for the country in the arena of foreign policy. The political upheavals of Bahrain, Egypt and Syria have had serious implications for Iran, which in turn contributed to severe friction between Iran and its other regional rivals, including Saudi Arabia, Israel and Turkey. Somehow, the Arab Spring seems to have given rise to an Iranian Autumn.

### **Bahrain Uprising: Iranian-Saudi New Cold War**

Iran’s adventurist foreign policy, in particular since Mahmud Ahmadinejad’s presidency began in 2005, with high emphasis on nuclear activity along with enhancement of missile capabilities, and influence in Sunni-dominated countries like Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Yemen (Ekhtiari Amiri, Ku Samsu, & Gholipour Fereidouni, 2011), had already drawn the two countries into a so-called Cold War. Recent developments in Bahrain, however, have been the most critical issue to unleash the hidden tensions in the relationship between Tehran and Riyadh.

With respect to its revolutionary ideal of “export the revolution”, and also supporting popular movements in the Muslim world as foreign policy principles, Bahrain is within the scope of Iran’s attention. Iran utilizes every opportunity to widen its zone of influence within the Persian Gulf

region with the intention to shift the balance of power in its own favour and consolidate its regional hegemony. Moreover, the Islamic Revolution of Iran that had affected Shiites in Bahrain and consequently endangered King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa's family, contributed to the expansion of the US military presence in this sheikhdom. Since then, Bahrain has been a Pentagon "staging ground". In the 1990s, about 1,300 US troops were stationed there; in 2001, the number increased to 4,500 during the US attack on Afghanistan by the Bush Administration, which considered Bahrain a major "non-NATO ally" (Tristram, 2011). So, as a strategic target, Iran views the taking of power from Shiites in Bahrain, home to the US Navy's 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet, as a diminishing US military threat against its territory. In other words, expelling US military forces is one of Iran's most important goals in the Persian Gulf region. For these reasons in general, Iran backed the Shiite rebels in Bahrain and conducted a propaganda campaign against the ruling Sunni government for suppressing Shiite protesters. The result of these Iranian endeavours, however, was to give rise to a feeling of "Iranophobia" (Sajjadpour, 2011) in the regional and international strategic arenas.

Saudi Arabia is also very sensitive to developments in Bahrain for several reasons: Firstly, it fears the possibility of Bahraini Shiites taking power. This apprehension stems from Riyadh's major setback in Iraq, when control of the country passed from Sunnis to Shiites. As a result, Saudi leaders have utilized all means not to lose Sunni control of the region again, in particular after the Bahraini unrest. It is at a time when the ouster of a Saudi cordial friend, Hosni Mubarak, has exacerbated the Saudi fear in light of his robust opposition against Iran and its suspected nuclear activities. Second, the ruling Saudi tribal elites who have historically held a monopoly of power (Ehteshami & Wright, 2007) and also have always followed the 'status-quo' policy in the Middle East, have been worrying about the impact of the Bahrain revolt on its own Shiite minority (10% of the population), particularly in the eastern oil-rich area of Al-Qatif, which is located just across the causeway from Bahrain. On 10 March 2011, when Shiites protested in Al-Qatif, Press TV, Iranian English News Channel, referred to it as the "arriving of a wave of Iranian revolution" to the Saudi Kingdom, which cemented further the Saudi concern. Saudi's anxiety has generally been due to three main elements: First, the sectarian clashes are opening "an old wound" in the Middle East; second, the possibility of a Shiites' claim to a share of political power; and the third reason, partial disruption of the oil production.

Furthermore, Iran occasionally displays its historical claim on Bahrain's territorial sovereignty, as happened in 2009. Saudi Arabia, as "elder brother" and "guardian" of Arab countries in the Persian Gulf region, sees it as its duty to defend each of these Sheikhdoms. For them, what is happening in Bahrain is an "internal family matter" and they view Iran's action as interference in the Arab world. Finally, an economic issue has established a strong connection between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Bahrain's oil and banking economy are heavily dependent on Saudi Arabia (Tristram, 2011). It is at a time that the United States also is a great economic beneficiary in Bahrain, in addition to the military importance of the latter. According to a *WikiLeaks* document in 2009, "U.S. companies have won major contracts between 2007 and 2009 that include Gulf Air's purchase of

24 Boeing 787 Dreamliners, a US\$5 billion joint venture with Occidental Petroleum to revitalize the Awali field, and more than US\$300 million in foreign military sales” (Bayaziddi, 2011). These economic and military implications definitely affect Saudi’s policy-making toward Iran, as they want to lessen the US’ concern about Iran’s hegemony in the region.

All the above-mentioned factors made Bahrain a “red line” for Saudis. Although Shiite leaders of the uprising severely rejected their connection with Iran, and Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni, the chairman of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), stressed that there had not been any clear evidence or document implicating Iran’s involvement in the country’s riots, the fact that Iran was in favour of development in Bahrain contributed to a backlash in Saudi Arabia. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), led by Saudi Arabia, condemned what it said was “an Iranian attempt to aggravate sectarian tension in Bahrain [...] and at an emergency meeting in the Saudi capital, expressed its deep concern over the continuing Iranian intervention in the internal matters of GCC countries by conspiring against their national security”(Dareini, 2011) .

Regarding this attempt, Slackman (2011) quoted Alireza Nader, an expert in international affairs with the RAND Corporation, as saying: “the Saudis are worried that they’re encircled - Iraq, Syria, Lebanon; Yemen is unstable; Bahrain is very uncertain [...].They worry that the region is ripe for Iranian exploitation. Iran has shown that it is very capable of taking advantage of regional instability”. In response, the Saudis rallied the Persian Gulf monarchies to support the Sunni monarchy in Bahrain by brutally suppressing the protests - and putting Iran on notice that they were “ready to enter war with Iran and even with Iraq in defence of Bahrain”(Nasr, 2011). In addition to Saudi fears of Iran, there is also “the consortium of Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen, Algeria, Bahrain, and [former] Libya, that all work - not necessarily in concert - to contain and rollback democratic change”(Cook, 2011). Accordingly, as Saudis had offered the former Mubarak regime political, diplomatic, and financial support to bring the Egyptian uprising to an end; based on their longstanding policy of “riyalpolitik”, they dealt the al-Khalifa royal family of Bahrain billions (Cook, 2011), and with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) sent 1,500 troops into Bahrain on March 14 to crackdown on the Shiite rioters. The Saudi action caused a serious reaction from Iran due to clashes between national interests of the two countries. Iranian president Mahmud Ahmadinejad stated that the intervention to quell pro-democracy protests is “foul and doomed” and added that the Saudis did an “ugly thing” in deploying troops. Also, the Iranian Parliament (Majlis) called the Saudi deployment in Bahrain an “occupation” with the agreement of the United States. Quoted from Iran’s state-run Islamic Republic News Agency, *IRNA*, they also said that “The Saudi Army has learnt nothing from the Islamic culture because had it been really powerful, it should have stood up to the crimes of the Zionist regimes against the defenceless people of Palestine” (Birnbaum, 2011). Saudi Arabia condemned all this as Iran's “irresponsible statements”.

This issue, along with the bilateral propaganda attacks and actions such as Saudi's accusation of Iran for the attempted assassination of the Saudi ambassador to the US, Adel Al-Jubeir; Bahrain's arrest of a terror cell which was suspected to have planned to attack high profile sites, such as the Saudi Embassy in Bahrain and the Gulf causeway linking Bahrain and Saudi Arabia; the arrest of some Iranian spies in Kuwait; Saudi's support of a GCC plan to invite Jordan and Morocco to be members, in effect making the organization a "protective club of Arab monarchies" against the Iranian threat; and also, Saudi Arabia's readiness to make up for shortages resulting from the international oil embargo against Iran which pushed the two countries to a new stage of intense "open-ended Cold War" since a year ago.

Saudi Arabia, further, was the first Arab state to withdraw its ambassador from Syria and support the pro-democracy movement in the latter country, with the aim of undermining the Iranian-Syrian alliance (Milani, 2011). In this regard, Saudi Arabia and Qatar also asked for the removal of Bashar al-Assad, and have explicitly maintained weapon shipment to the Syrian opposition. In order to reinforce their collective military strength, "the Peninsula Shield", mainly protective against any Iranian threat- the GCC members further approved an internal proposal in July 2011 that would increase troop levels from 50,000 to 100,000 by the end of 2012. Security, defence and intelligence advisor Dr. Sami Al-faraj, stated that the "decision was made in order to counter a growing threat from Iran and its subversive terrorist elements across the GCC"(Fulton, 2011). All these factors together have brought Iran and Saudi Arabia to a sensitive stage wherein the previous fragile confidence-building over the past decade has broken down and to a large extent has given rise to further isolation of Iran in the region. Moreover, the trend of the development in relations of the two countries reveals that Iran and Saudi bilateral relations will be frozen further in the on-going Cold War unless the foreign policies of both countries, in particular Iran, make a real shift in the near future.

### **Egyptian Revolution: Flaring Iranian and Israeli Hostility**

The ousting of Hosni Mubarak has inaugurated a new window in the process of foreign policy-making of the two "geographically distant enemies"-- Iran and Israel-- and also given rise to a hazy atmosphere that has further intensified the hostility between them.

Israel's security strategy in the region has for decades been "based on the existence of autocratic regimes that were able to maintain relationships with Israel, irrespective of any popular feeling against such relationships, and at the same time to ensure that no threats to Israel's security emanated from their territories" (Hellyer, 2011). For Israel, therefore, the shift in Egyptian leadership has been more of a threat, rather than an opportunity. Indeed, the overthrow of Mubarak has left a "dark territory" for Israel which, as U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates stated, "it's impossible to read the overhead imagery, so to speak, and know what's down there in terms of outcomes"(Ignatius, 2011). Although Israel is economically and militarily strong for its size, as Inbar (2012,p.39) argues "It is a small state with modest resources, limited diplomatic clout, and

few friends in its neighbourhood. Thus, it cannot hope to influence its environment in the Middle East. Unable to shape the world beyond its borders, Jerusalem must be prepared to meet all security threats that could potentially emerge from the surrounding Arab-Islamic world.” The recent political upheaval in the Middle East, particularly in Egypt, has brought “a degree of uncertainty” for Israeli leaders that have influenced the country’s foreign policy making to a large extent.

For Iran, however, the development in Egypt has projected more opportunities. From the Iranian perspective, the new government would be much better than Mubarak, as he was completely pro-West and his cordial relations with Israel led to an anti-Iranian coalition in the Arab world. Moreover, he possessed an aggressive attitude toward regional Islamic movements such as Hezbollah and Hamas. Therefore, regardless of the future government of Egypt, whether it be “secular-nationalistic” or “Islamic-ideological”, Iran would like to capitalize on this country (Barzegar, 2011).

The policies of the Egyptian post-revolution government along with Iran’s attempt to take advantage of Egypt’s internal developments has inspired, either directly or indirectly, a renewed phase of tension between Iran and Israel. The initial action of the Egyptian transitional government was limited normalization of its relations with Iran; since 1979 the two countries had enjoyed a frosty diplomatic relationship by virtue of Iran’s Islamic revolution and the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, the Camp David. The post-revolution government’s stance toward Iran was odious for the Israeli regime with regard to its previous close friendship with Egypt and their joint hostility toward Iran. Later, permission of the transitional government for the passage of two Iranian warships through the Suez Canal en route to Latakia, Syria, on 22 February 2011-- for the first time after thirty-one years-- intensified Iran’s and Israel’s antagonistic behaviour. Iran had been struggling to expand its influence in the region after the downfall of Mubarak, and according to an anonymous Egyptian Maritime agent, agreed to pay about US\$300,000 in fees for the passage of its vessels, which apparently had a training mission in Syria. Notwithstanding this, it appears that Iran also tended to show off its naval power for its regional enemy-- namely Israel-- and its main ally, the United States. Meanwhile, besides widening the zone of influence in the Levant, it could provide the Syrian regime with necessary armaments.

The actions of both Iran and the post-revolution Egypt created severe concern for Israel, as it had already lost its close friend, Mubarak, and was now watching Iranian navy forces near its borders. In this regard, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu declared, “Israel views this Iranian move with utmost gravity [adding] Iran tries to exploit the situation that has been created [in the region] in order to expand its influence by passing warships through the Suez Canal” (*Guardian*, 2011). Iranian-Israeli hostility was exacerbated further on 29 June 2011, when the Commander of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Force, Amir Ali Hajizadeh, stated that “U.S. targets in the region and Israel are within the range of Iran’s missiles. [Adding] the range

of our missiles has been designed based on American bases in the region as well as the Zionist regime”(*Tehran Times*, 2011).

The heightened Iranian-Israeli animosity, meanwhile, has also been influenced by indirect integral variables. For instance, the Egyptian transitional regime’s severe opposition to end Syria’s membership in the Arab Union on 18 October 2011 transformed it into an awkward issue for Israel’s foreign policy. Although Israel has a phobia pertaining to instability in the region in which any chaos may affect its security, it prefers the downfall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, due to its strong connection to Iran and its strong support of anti-Israeli militias just like Hezbollah and Hamas. In other words, the decision had signalled a notable shift in policy-making of the post-Mubarak regime that would jeopardize the national interests of the Jewish regime. Later, the coming into power of the Muslim Brotherhood in the political structure of the country would become a nightmare for Israel but an opportunity for Iran. Israel’s concern goes back to the 1979 Iranian Revolution, when “a pro-Western and Israel-friendly Shah was replaced by the hard-line anti-Israel theocrats of the Iranian Islamic Revolution” (Inbar, 2012). The recent policies of this party justify the Israeli fear. For instance, “Under pressure from the Brotherhood, Egypt's interim government has reduced restrictions on traffic to and from Gaza, circumventing the Israeli blockade of the Hamas-ruled enclave. This will strengthen Hamas, an offshoot of the Egyptian Brotherhood committed to Israel's eradication, and encourage it to adopt a more aggressive posture toward the Jewish state”(Inbar, 2012). It is at the same time that, with regard to Iran’s and the Brotherhood’s “ideological inclinations”, the former has been trying to take advantage in order to put Israel under more pressure. That is why Netanyahu, Israeli prime minister, has warned that “Egypt will go in the direction of Iran”(Lis, 2011). Meanwhile, Egypt’s new leaders are “exerting new and strong influence on the various Palestinian factions, ushering in the unity deal”(Ghajar, 2011). After the Syrian uprising, Hamas, Israel’s old enemy, also established a “cordial relationship” with post-Mubarak leaders and has been negotiating a deal with them in order to reside in their country. This favours Iran, which has been searching for ways to maintain Hamas as a potential threat to the Jewish regime. Therefore, “neighbouring Gaza is also posing the largest military threat to the Jewish state” (Springborg, 2011: 8), and Egypt to some extent is now considered a security concern for Israel.

In addition, since Israel’s security arrangements in the region depend heavily on the Camp David accords (Hellyer, 2011), it also has a serious concern that the new developments in Egypt may jeopardize the 31-year-old peace treaty between the two countries. This apprehension is rooted in the nature of the post-Mubarak ruling government that has affected the country’s foreign policy tremendously. In fact, it is one of the features of transitional regimes moving toward a mature democracy that “democratic control over foreign policy is partial, [...] and countries become more aggressive and war-prone” (Mansfield & Snyder, 1995:5). According to an April 2011 poll, “54 percent of Egyptians favour annulling their country's peace treaty with Israel”(Kohut, Wike, Horowitz, Poushter, & Barker, 2011). If Iran could improve its relations with the new Egypt, the

peace treaty would be a triumph card for the former to play at any essential time in particular when Iran is faced with a serious Israeli threat. It is at a time when, above all, the new government in Egypt may “prefer keeping Israel at arm's length so as to curry public favour” (Inbar, 2011). Egypt-Israel trade disputes regarding gas supply and price can be mentioned as examples.

In short, as it is evident, the Egyptian revolution has created a new battleground for the old regional adversaries, namely Iran and Israel. Restricted normalization of the Iranian-Egyptian relationship after the collapse of Mubarak's regime, as well as Iran's foreign policy approach with the aim of enhancing its influence in the Levant and in the political structure of the new regime in Egypt, has led to greater antagonism between Iran and Israel. On the other hand, the policies of the post-Mubarak regime under the influence of the Islamic Brotherhood could lead to further isolation of the Jewish regime in favour of Iran, thus aggravating the hostility of the regional foes, Iran and Israel. Israel's recently severe stance against Iran, in particular regarding the latter's nuclear activities, to some extent stems from Egypt's developments as well as Iran's regional threats to the Jewish regime. This was at a time when the United States, Mubarak's long-term friend, had embraced the Midan al Tahrir Revolution, which was extremely unpleasant for Jewish leaders.

### **Syrian Uprising: Growing Turkish-Iranian Rivalry**

Iran and Turkey have enjoyed a better relationship thanks to the election of Iranian President Khatami in 1997 and the overtaking of power by the Turkish Islamist AKP party in 2002. However, for centuries both sides had vied for greater influence in the Middle East and Central Asia. Rivalry between the two countries has surfaced anew with the recent developments in the Middle East and North Africa.

Turkey's earlier role in helping Gaza after the invasion of Israeli troops and later, in 2009, its acute stance against Israel in the Daoust Conference, in which Recep Tayyip Erdogan had condemned the Israeli attack and left the conference, having enhanced Turkey's popularity among the Muslim countries. This brought discontent to the Iranian regime which appeared to be seeking more influence and to preserve a foothold in the Muslim world. Later on, Turkey's foreign policy aimed at spreading its kind of governance, and therefore tensed mutual relations between Iran and Turkey. When Erdogan went on an “Arab Spring tour” to Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia in September, he persuaded them to adopt ‘secularism’ in their new constitutions and argued for a “democratic Islam”, which was accepted later by “both Tunisia's al-Nahda leader, Rachid Ghannouchi, and Saad el-Katatni, the head of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's new party, Freedom and Justice [as] a useful Islamist model”(Dalacoura, 2012) and efficient democratic political system. “[Turkey's] emphasis on a secular path for Arab states clearly hit a raw nerve among the theocrats governing Iran”(Tol & Vatanka, 2011). As a result, and with regard to the Syrian context, Iran accused Turkey of leading a campaign to bring “American Islam” to the region, as it had previously accused some Persian Gulf Arab states, particularly during the 1980s. But it was Turkey's reaction to Arab developments, and in particular its opposing stance toward the Syrian



Bashar Al-Assad regime that upset Iran and split the former friends; mainly by virtue of geostrategic, *'realpolitik'*, and ideological prominence of the Bashar regime in Iran's foreign policy.

The Syrian ruling leadership belongs to the Alawite sect, which has Shiite roots. Currently, Iran is the only other Shiite regime in the world, so their alliance has acquired "a reinforcing faith-based dimension" (Aneja, 2011). The Syrian regime, as Iran's longstanding and sole strategic Arab state ally in the Middle East region, is also regarded as "the lever" by which Iran exerts influence in Lebanon. This influence is executed through Syria's local allies, "notably the two main Shiite movements - Hezbollah [which leads the March 8 coalition] and Amal, and their network of Lebanese partners in different communities"(Muir, 2011).

Further, when Hezbollah materialized in the early 1980s from "the matrix of the Shiite underclass of southern Lebanon, backed by former President Assad and Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC)"(Aneja, 2011), the main channel for training, financial and military support to this militia group-- which was placed in Lebanon's Baalbek, adjacent to the Syrian border-- has been Syria. Khalid Mashal, leader of Hamas, and other related officials, have likewise lived in Bermuk camp, headquarters of the Hamas leadership in the Damascus countryside, since 1999. Therefore, should the Syrian Shiite regime collapse and power be taken by a Sunni government, "Hezbollah's lifeline from its Iranian patrons would risk being severed, leaving the movement weakened both in the Lebanese political arena and militarily vis-a-vis Israel"(Muir, 2011). In this perception, Burhan Ghalioun, Syrian National Council leader and the main Syrian opposition leader in exile, said on 3 December 2011 that, "Damascus would have no special relationship with Iran and Hezbollah if president Bashar al-Assad lost power"(Hamilton, 2011). In this respect, a tangible outcome would be a reduction of Iran's influence in the region, particularly in Lebanon- in favour of Turkey, which has been seeking further influence in the Arab world.

Moreover, after Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979, Syria has also been a main part of the frontline of Iran's "defence strategy" in the region versus Israel. Syria's territorial adjacency to Israel has made it a forerunner of the "resistance line" and a perennial threat to Israel as well. That is an advantage that Iran has always benefited from during the past three decades. Iran's ambassador to Lebanon, Ghazanfar Roknabadi, during a meeting with authorities of Lebanese and Palestinian resistance groups in December 2011, said that Syria is the "resistance arm" in the region. He added that in the present sensitive period we should be aware not to take any action that can save Israel. So, "weakening of the Syrian-Iranian corridor is also a weakening of Iran's power in Israel's backyard"(Ghajar, 2011). In other words, Iran uses its regional ally to bridle and supervise Israel; and if it is necessary, endanger Israeli stability and security. Meanwhile, "Tehran's hopes of deterring an Israeli attack on its nuclear facilities and preserving a foothold in the Middle East"(Milani, 2011) has stimulated the Islamic regime to preserve and assist the Syrian regime.

Syria is the pivotal Arab state, and “when it is united, as under Hafiz al-Asad, it becomes a regional player able to punch well above its weight; when it is divided, as now, it becomes an arena for the struggle of external forces, all seeking to shift the regional balance of power in their favour” (Hinnebusch, 2012). Accordingly, a collapse of the Syrian regime would shift the security balance of the region in favour of Iran’s main adversaries and rivals such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel. In fact, losing Syria and assuming the emergence of a stable Sunni alternative, favouring Syria’s return to “the Arab mainstream”, would be “a devastating blow to Tehran’s regional ambitions”(Khalaf, 2011) that could give the upper hand to Iran’s rivals to play a more active role in the development of the region and isolate Tehran further. In regards to this, Syrian opposition leader Burhan Ghalioun has said that if the Assad regime falls, Syria would align itself with the Arab League and the Gulf and break “the strategic military alliance” with Iran (Hamilton, 2011), which could be a serious alarm for Tehran. To a large extent, it reveals the enmity of a probable Sunni government in Syria, which would appear to be a potential enemy of Iran. At the same time, Iran’s relations with GCC members have become tense recently and it has also been confronted with some hardships in another country, Lebanon. That is why Iran has strived to maintain a strategic relationship with Syria- so that the latter can play its regional role. Otherwise Iran would be more isolated via reduction of its “strategic depth”.

For the above-mentioned reasons, Iran has condemned the protests in Syria by claiming a connection to “foreigners”, in particular Americans and Zionists, in the instability. To preserve their staunch ally, Iran has supported Syria’s governing elite during its unrest in various ways, such as supplying equipment, technical aid and means, and dispatching its expert personnel to train and advise the Assad regime on suppressing the protestors. Around this time, Syrian protesters set fire to Iranian and Hezbollah flags and symbols (Namadha) several times and chanted, “Neither Hezbollah nor Iran”.

Turkey, in contrast, views the Syrian uprising from a different standpoint. Before the outbreak of the popular protests in Syria, these two countries had enjoyed an ‘excellent’ relationship. In 2009, Syria’s president and his Turkish counterpart affectionately called each other “brother”. Erdogan referred to Syria as “our second home” and Assad hailed their “joint future” as a model of brotherly ties (The Christian Science Monitor, 2011). However, with regard to the neighbourhoods of Turkey and Syria, the unrest has threatened Turkey in several ways; instability in its immediate border area disturbs trade since Syria connects Turkey to “lucrative Arab markets”, and finally the problem of the waves of refugees, as had taken place once in the 1990s during the Iraq war. At the outset, therefore, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey’s moderate Islamist Prime Minister, had made an effort to encourage a peaceful outcome but “repeated interventions with Mr. Assad drew a blank, leaving the Turkish leadership disillusioned and angrily accusing the Syrians of breaking promises”(Muir, 2011). Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, declared that Turkey should not be expected to be “silent” when seeing the Syrian regime intensifying its “cruelty to innocent people”. Thereafter, Turkey has become determined to breakdown Syria’s Baathist regime.

While Iran displayed its dissatisfaction on different occasions, surprisingly, Turkey took further action and allowed the Syrian opposition to gather and make declarations on Turkish soil and also has accepted refugees and military deserters. In spite of Iran's repeated pleas for Turkey to uphold its support for the Syrian government, in September 2011, Erdogan declared that he had "cut off all dialogue with Damascus"(Tol & Vatanka, 2011) and also that he had backed the Arab League stance on sanctions against Syria. Meanwhile, Turkey's energy minister, Taner Yildiz, announced that "joint oil exploration projects" with Syria had been halted. [He also] threatened to stop Turkey's electricity exports to Syria. Moreover, Turkish business leaders say trade, which was worth about US\$2.5 billion last year, has all but stopped (Head, 2011). The relations between Turkey and Syria deteriorated further when pro-Assad mobs attacked Turkish diplomatic missions in Damascus, Aleppo and Latakia, which finally led to the closure of Turkey's embassy in Syria and the suspension of mutual diplomatic relations on 26 March 2012. Turkey, along with the Arab League, is "now trying to plan for a transition to a post-Assad era, through discussions with Syrian opposition figures in exile"(Head, 2011).

Turkey's stance, alongside its struggle "to occupy some of the regional political space over which revolutionary Iran's influence has been dominant so far"(Aneja, 2011), has exacerbated friction between Iran and Turkey and escalated their existing rivalry. The crisis in Syria, indeed, has been pleasant music to the ears of its non-Arab northern neighbour, Turkey, in various ways; Turkey can use this occasion to quell Kurdish separatists residing within Syrian borders. In addition, with regard to Iran and Turkey's natural rivalry in the region, regime change in Damascus in favour of the Sunni majority would deal a "severe blow" to Iran, Turkey's main competitor for regional influence. Also, "It would create a vertical Sunni axis to break the Shiite crescent that links Iran, Iraq in its post-2003 Shiite-majority form, Alawite-ruled Syria, and Hezbollah-dominated Lebanon"(Muir, 2011). In view to this, Turkey alongside France, Saudi Arabia has recently "begun financing, training, arming and infiltrating insurgents into [Syria]"(Hinnebusch, 2012).

Later, Turkey's green line for installation of NATO anti-missile defence shields on its soil on September 15, which was obviously for tackling the Iranian missile threat and preserving Israel, further tensed bilateral ties of Tehran and Ankara. This matter in fact clearly signified that Turkey's "basic security interests are anchored to the West" (Tol & Vatanka, 2011). The unexpected actions of the Turkish authorities especially since last year, based on priority of their own national interest, however, contributed to the acute grievance of the Iranian regime and intensified regional rivalry of the two countries. General Yahya Safavi, a top military adviser to Iranian Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, warned Turkey that "it must radically rethink its policies on Syria, the NATO missile shield and promoting Muslim secularism in the Arab world". He accused Turkey of "acting in line with the goals of America and warned that such behaviour would not be tolerated by Ankara's neighbours in Iran, Syria, and Iraq" (*Today's Zaman*, 2011). Also, Iranian state media intensified their propaganda against Turkish leaders, "calling them turncoats willing to

allow Turkey to become a staging ground for a Western military intervention in Syria along the Libyan model” (Tol & Vatanka, 2011).

The Arab Spring, in general, has illustrated two basic realities: “First, pragmatic political and economic interests spurred the acceleration in Turkish-Iranian relations over the past decade, not a shared vision of a religiously run state. Second, the eventual outcome of the current rivalry for influence will affect the security architecture of the Middle East for years to come”(Tol & Vatanka, 2011). Rivalry of the two countries in the Arab world, in fact, has illustrated the increasing divergence of Turkish and Iranian interests. The regional uprisings, in general, have created an appropriate ground for Turkey to enhance its influence and “prestige” among Arab publics even “at the expense of” its former partnership with Iran. Their rivalry is not only an endeavour to achieve immediate national interests, but also an investment for long-term political and economic presence and exploitation in this region. In this respect, the Syrian protesting has bred “a serious clash of interests” between the two countries and alarmed the Iranian regime about the growing power and popularity of its immediate neighbour, Turkey. It also created some serious challenges between the two countries which is reminiscent of the historic Turkish-Persian rivalry.

## CONCLUSION

The uprisings in the Arab world either directly or indirectly have precipitated some negative implications for Iran in the regional and international scenes. Iran constantly has been seeking to enhance its influence in the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf due to the crucial political-economic and security position of this region for the Iranian leaders. Thus, this objective pushed Iran to support the Shiite protest aftermath of the unrest in Bahrain. Iran’s position, however, caused a serious reaction from Saudi Arabia, which has always been intimidated by Iran’s regional policies and intentions over the past three decades. Iran-Saudi clashes pertaining to the Bahrain issue have given rise to a new phase of the Cold War between the two countries that has noticeably affected their political and economic relations during recent months.

Iran also embraced the ousting of the former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, mainly due to his great hostility toward Iran and close relationship with Israel. Restricted normalization of ties between Iran and the new Egypt, and the former’s measures to expand its zone of influence in the post-Mubarak regime as well as in the Levant, contributed to Israel’s great anxiety. Israel had earlier lost its cordial Arab friend and was facing diverse political, economic, and security threats since the governance of the transitional regime in Egypt, with the dominance of the Islamic Brotherhood Party, could not accept Iran’s presence and influence in this region. The clash of interests of these old regional hostilities, therefore, enhanced their antagonistic behaviour further. With regard to the close interconnection of regional matters, Iran’s policy towards Egyptian development coincided with other issues, in particular its nuclear activities, that have caused Israel to marginalize Iran further in the international system through vigorous propaganda and actions.

Yet, the Syrian uprising has served to expose the existence of contradictory intentions and natural rivalry of two neighbouring states, Iran and Turkey. Syria, as the only alliance among Arab and non-Arab countries, enjoys a high priority in Iran's foreign policy apparatus, in particular due to its position as a frontline of resistance against Israel and its crucial role in Iran's access to and support of regional Islamic militias, Hezbollah and Hamas. That is why Iran has taken all necessary measures to maintain the Bashar Al-Assad regime after the Syrian riot. On the other hand, Turkey, with the aim of exerting further influence in the region, downplaying Iran's regional power and reviving its ancient hegemony has adopted an opposing stance toward the Syrian developments in order to topple the Bashar Assad regime. The divergent policies of these two bordering Islamic countries have given rise to acute friction in their relations in recent months. Notwithstanding the facts, it appears that the Middle East developments would have further repercussions for the Iranian regime unless fundamental changes take place in Iran's foreign policy, which is very unlikely at this point in time.

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