

Cyclone

Journal for Policy and Strategic Affairs | Vol.1, 2021

Marking a decade to the Arab Spring:
The turmoil that changed the Middle East

Arab Spring or Islamic Awakening?: Iran's Strategic Balance Sheet in face of the Turmoil

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The Arab Spring found the Iranian regime some 18 months after what it believed to have been a successful containment of the strong Green Wave of Iran (2009) referred to also by western media as the Persian Spring – one of the most difficult challenges it has had to face over the past two decades. It was therefore natural that the Islamic regime initially believed that the wave of protests sweeping over the Arab world would reignite domestic public unrest.

Yet, what was initially perceived as an imminent threat transformed in time into a strategic opportunity. The weakening of the Arab world as a political factor and the disintegration of regimes, some of which had been Iran's bitter enemies,


created governing vacuums in which Tehran was quick to entrench itself, striving to instate the Shiite Crescent vision of territorial contiguity from the Gulf to the Mediterranean. As a result, Tehran had rebranded the Arab Spring as an "Islamic Awakening" – a development that provided the Islamic regime with the golden opportunity to advance its hegemonic ideological vision in the region, at the center of which is exporting the Islamic revolution.

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Iran's growing involvement and clout in Syria are perceived as some of Tehran's greatest strategic achievements this past decade. Syria is known in Iran as "the golden link in the resistance camp (against Israel) chain", and plays a vital role in Iran's national security strategy, alongside Tehran's ongoing influence and stronghold in Lebanon. Iran has deepened its military presence in Syria to ensure Assad's survival as ruler, adding Hizballah into the campaign mix in 2013. In addition, Iran attributes great importance to the establishment of political order in Syria on the morning after the civil war will end, viewing it as a central landmark in what it calls "reshaping the landscape of the Middle East".

In addition to Syria, Iran's strategic accomplishments in Yemen also stand out. Thanks to its support of the (Shiite) Houthi rebels prior to the Arab Spring, the latter have managed to take control over large areas in Yemen, including its capital, Sanaa. Its influence in Yemen allows Iran to use "proxies" against Saudi Arabia, and cause damage in strategic infrastructure targets in the kingdom (particularly airports and oil industry facilities). Large Saudi and Arab military forces are engaged in this ongoing conflict in Yemen as part of a model similar to the one employed against Israel via Hizballah's activity. Tehran's impact in Yemen also enables it to have presence in strategic areas of the Red Sea and Horn of Africa. On the military level, these areas have become Iran's main experimentation field, used to test weapons (drones, missiles, explosives boats) it intends to use in other conflict zones too, including against Israel.

Iraq is yet another arena in which the Iranians have had some strategic successes in the past decade, among them: deepening the dependence of the current government in Baghdad on the Iranian regime; developing ties between the key religious and political powers in Iraq (especially Shiites) and the Islamic regime in Tehran; tightening the economic relations between the two states; and utilizing Iraq's territory for Iran's defense needs, including the attempt to deploy missiles directed at Israel or activating armed Shiite militias against American presence. However, the Iranian impact in Iraq is periodically accompanied by locals' violent protests, among them Shiite Arabs. One particularly strong wave of violent protest took place at the end of 2019 against the Baghdad government, and included vehement criticism of Iranian military religious and economic involvement in Iraq.



Iran's growing impact in the various theaters has been posing greater threat to Israel. The war in Syria has enabled Iran to establish military infrastructure that poses a threat to Israel, at the heart of which is missile deployment or the development of missile production lines including precision guided weapons. Iran also funds Hizballah and other Shiite militia groups active in Syria over the past ten years. Tehran has focused special efforts on the development of military and intelligence infrastructures in the Golan Heights, and was supported in its endeavors by Hamas' and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad's force buildup in the Gaza Strip, as well as the attempt to establish infrastructures that would enable it to launch missiles from Iraqi and Yemenite territory.

At the same time, Iran continues to advance its nuclear program, especially since Washington's withdrawal from the JCPOA signed in 2015. Consequently, direct and unprecedented friction has intensified between Iran and Israel, led by the Israeli strikes against Iranian infrastructure and forces in Syria, which, at times, has led to military retaliation against Israel by Tehran's proxies in Syria. More recently the shadow war at sea between Iran and Israel gained momentum.

Alongside its strategic achievements, Iran has also been facing an exacerbation of long-standing threats or the development of new ones. The strengthening in its regional status and defiant moves against its neighbors as well as the United States have led to a variety of harsh blows, such as the assassination of Soleimani and more stringent economic sanctions against the Iranian regime (particularly since the U.S. administration withdrew from the nuclear deal in 2018), as a result of which Iran's economic distress has taken a turn for the worse.

Moreover, Tehran has not been able to undermine the local regimes posing a challenge to it, primarily the Saudi one, so threatened by Iran that it has been forced to form an anti-Iranian front, tightening its relations with Israel in the process, and further aggravating Iran, which now fears Israeli security presence on its doorstep.

Thus, over the past decade, the long-standing rift between Sunnis and Shiites in the Middle East has deepened, and has, in fact, become more tangible and profound than the traditional division between the Arab and Muslim world and Israel. The current Middle Eastern camp map shows Iran and its allies on one side, and all actors fighting Tehran on the other – a camp comprised of key states in the Sunni Arab world and Israel that were formerly hostile toward one another and are now enjoying a fruitful collaboration.

Another strategic challenge faced by Iran that has developed due to regional turbulence is the rise of the "Islamic State" (ISIS). Tehran has been hit by this organization both during the campaigns in Syria and Iraq, and in terror attacks carried out on Iranian soil. It has managed to maneuver both battle and diplomatic fields well, weakening the organization and toppling its regime. On the military level it has promoted a determined campaign against ISIS both via its own forces and the various Shiite militia groups it controls.

Iran thus holds a mixed achievement balance sheet at the end of this decade. On the one hand, it has managed to preserve Assad's rule in Syria as well as its assets in Lebanon, fortified its status in Iraq and Yemen, and successfully integrated itself into international efforts to defeat "the Islamic State". On the other hand, it is receiving a number of harsh military and morale-related blows at the hands of Israel and the United States, grappling with ongoing economic distress, struggling to contain domestic disquiet, and failing to destabilize key states in the Arab world. Looking ahead, it seems that Biden becoming president boosts Tehran's confidence, making it bolder, and leading it to advance defiant steps in the Middle East and its nuclear program in an attempt to broaden its impact on shaping the future order in key arenas in the region, primarily Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

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