Iran and the Arab Revolutions
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Abstract
What is Iran’s policy in response to the Arab revolutions? The advent of these revolutions throughout 2011 surprised Iran like all other countries. These revolutions have been important for Iran in terms of preserving its “ideological values” and “geopolitical interests.” Regarding the preservation of its ideological values, these developments are significant due to the ideals of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which aspired to support popular movements, challenge domestic and regional interference by foreign powers, and realize "Islamic unity." Regarding the preservation of Iran's geopolitical interests, the significance of recent events is mainly due to the effects of change, foremost change of current governments on bilateral relations with Iran and regional stability, issues related to the regional balance of power, and the role of regional and trans-regional actors and, generally speaking, political and economic interests.

Touching upon the importance of Iran’s bilateral ties with different Arab countries as well as regional sensitivities, the present article contends that Tehran’s policy towards these revolutions differs from one country to another, each possessing its own characteristics. Therefore, the Islamic Republic has sought to create a balance between its ideological values and its geopolitical interests. Meanwhile, the Arab revolutions have presented both challenges and opportunities to Iran in terms of ideological values and geopolitical interests. In terms of the opportunities, these developments in the domain of ideological values are significant from two aspects. First, the repudiation of the concept of Iranophobia, and second, the reinforcement of Islamic-nationalistic views in the Arab world, which will lead to the enhancement of Tehran’s ties with the Arab governments in the future. In the domain of the geopolitical interests, these developments have provided opportunities for Iran in three aspects. First, the end of Iran’s geopolitical loneliness in the region. Second, the emergence of nationalist and popular parliaments thereby reinforcing inter-governmental coalitions. And third, the enhancement of Iran’s regional role.

Yet, parallel to the emerged opportunities, the Arab revolutions have brought about some challenges for Iran. For instance in the domain of ideological values one can refer to the differences appeared in defining
the ideological aspirations that form these developments. Iran views these movements either as the “Islamic Awakening,” inspired by Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution or, from a pessimistic view, as a “Human awakening”, and a Western project to influence the Arab societies. However, the prevailing view in the Arab world towards these developments, which is also backed by the West, is that of the “Arab Spring” or revolution of the middle class for the achievement of civil rights and political freedom. Regarding the geopolitical interests, the main challenge relates to the rivalry which has emerged between Iran and the other regional and trans-regional players over the management of the ongoing developments. In this respect, the rivalries among Iran and the two other regional players, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, are of great importance. Each of these players has pursued its own interests over the course of these developments. As the rivalry becomes intense at the regional level and trans-regional players such as the US, the EU, China and Russia enter the equation, Iran’s policies have been subject to fluctuations.

Lastly, the Arab revolutions and their upshots have left Iran to enhance its regional role by employing its ideological and geopolitical factors. Meanwhile, the Arab revolutions strengthened the “regional perspectives and approaches” for the settlement of the regional crises, as opposed to the “international perspectives” and the Western approaches.

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