



## Reports

# Iran and the Arab Revolutions: Narratives Establishing Iran's Monopolism

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### Abstract

This paper reviews Iran's narratives about the Arab revolutions as it sets off from the perception that these narratives encompass a grand Iranian visionary narrative based on Iran's significant influence on the Islamic world and its future. The narratives are presumed to promote Iran's 'sovereign right' to lead the Islamic world. The paper describes how Iranian narratives dealt with the Arab revolutions as an influential event shaping the region's future in which Iran must play a role. As part of this vision, Iran received the Arab revolutions of Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen with enthusiasm that quickly faded out. In Libya, Iran's initial enthusiasm was offset by its apprehensions after the NATO's military intervention there. Iran continued to support Bahrain's status as a 'genuine revolution backed by divine power'. However, Iran's position on Syria differed as it condemned the Syrian revolution early on. The paper notes that the Iranian narratives over the Syrian revolution have been brief, abstracted and heedless toward the victims of the conflict.

### The paper identifies the Iranian narratives along the following modules:

- The Islamic State's (ISIL) threat.
- Foreign intervention and the targeting of the 'resistance'.
- Fighting terrorism and the new Iran.
- Mahdism – the Government of "Imam al-Zaman" (The Leader of the Time).

The issue of Mahdism has been described by the paper as pivotal to the Iranian vision, justifying part of the logic behind Iran's military intervention in the Arab region, particularly in Syria. In this respect, the Revolutionary Guard has been employed to prepare the ground for Imam Al-Zaman's emergence in order to serve as the potential guard for the 'Anticipated Imam'. Moreover, an ideological reframing of the Guard and its redeployment for a new mission protracts its scope and presence and legitimises the rationale for expanding its influence and involvement in Shi'a and non-Shi'a arenas outside Iran.

For the five years following the Arab Spring, Iran remained engaged in putting together its own visionary narratives about this transformation in a sustained and continuous way, with not one, but multiple forms, titles and levels.

This paper outlines several Iranian narratives on the Arab revolutions and discusses their dimensions with the premise that these narratives involve both explicit and implicit, fixed and changing elements that may seem contradictory in many aspects. However, the final grand Iranian narrative primarily proclaims Iran's 'excellence' and vital influence in the Islamic world and its future and promotes its 'merit' and 'supreme right' to lead the Islamic world. This is associated primarily with the role Iran wants to play and keeps pushing the world for.

### **The Arab Revolutions: A Narrative of Enthusiasm and Conviction**

Iran has welcomed the Arab revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, two countries in which it maintains significant relations with Islamist movements. For Iran, these transformations were seen as a historic opportunity to create a strong relationship with the two countries and their new leaderships. However, the reactions of the leaders of Islamist movements in Egypt and Tunisia caused Iran's enthusiasm to decline when they reasserted that they would not replicate the Iranian model.(1) After the Arab revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei described the latest changes in the Islamic world as "an introduction to a significant transformation and the rule of Islam". He stated that Ahl al-Bayt (the descendants of Prophet Muhammad's family) should "support these Islamic movements". This view was an obvious attempt to give these revolutions an ideological background as "a cry of protest against Western domination". Khamenei described ousted president Hosni Mubarak as "an obedient servant to the Americans and Israel for thirty years".(2) The Iranian perception has emphasised the Islamic component in these transformations: "The people of the region want Islam and dignity and America should never block their drive for self-determination".(3)

According to Khamenei, the youth movements in Islamic countries constitute a blow to secular political schools, saying "seeking to fulfil their hopes and aspirations, the youth in Muslim countries favour the teachings of Islam over secular beliefs." He attributed this to "the 'Iranian people's struggle". Khamenei has further described the revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain and Yemen as a "divine empathy" which must 'fully end the dominance of key enemies: the Zionists and the Americans'.

Iran's narratives dealt with the Arab revolutions as an event that would ultimately reshape the region's future in which Iran should play a role. "The dictators who depend on America and the West are falling off one after another while the region's future remains vulnerable to diverse possibilities that should be monitored closely".(4) This observation seems to express an urgent need for Iran to relaunch the concept of religious democracy for Muslim populations. This is in addition to Khomeini's plan to establish a ruling system aiming to "refill the vacuum created by the future trends of these events". The 'religious democracy' Khamenei has talked about can 'fill in the vacuum of future developments in the region and find its way through the rhetorical model of revolutionary Iran' and the call for 'the religiously sanctioned rule of the people'.

The fundamentalist movement has anticipated that the religious elites would dominate the scene of regional developments as a possible consequence. However, they did not rule out a possible "return in disguise by agents of former dictatorial regimes". This is what they described as "the grave danger of re-establishing western-dominated regimes under the guise of democracy and freedom".(5) Khamenei has acknowledged that the rebirth of nations is linked to their countries' geographical, historical, political and cultural circumstances. "We cannot expect what has happened in Egypt, Tunisia or any other country to replicate Iran's grand Islamic Revolution which was staged more than thirty years ago." But he talks about common grounds and clearly looks with great interest to the Egyptian revolution,(6) and the possible impact it could have on the Arab world and Iran's relations with North Africa.

The Iranian fundamentalist discourse clearly reveals an ideological reading of the Arab revolutions. These revolutions pose as an introduction to 'an Islamic Awakening, reflecting the spirit of the Iranian Islamic revolution and the Iranian people's steadfastness for 32 years'. Khamenei expressed this in a speech in Tehran at an international conference on Islamic Awakening, held in 2011. "The Arab uprisings [were] inspired by the Iranian Islamic Revolution's concepts and denotations."(7) Khamenei has re-emphasised the phrase: "religiously sanctioned rule of the people", warning the people in the region not to confuse "Islamic democracy, which values commitment to Islamic principles, with Western democracy which is anti-religious".(8) However, Iran's enthusiasm towards the Islamic Awakening in several countries was not applied to Syria. This position led to deep disagreement between the Islamic Republic and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

Iran's early official reading of the popular Arab uprisings came before the emergence of any clear results, whether with regard to the revolutions that toppled their regimes or those that remained uncompleted. However, Khamenei warned that it would be a mistake to consider the toppling of regimes as the desired result. "Traitor regimes do not fall when their prominent leaders exit from power. If they are replaced by their aides, nothing will change as it would only be a ploy set for the people."

Moreover, in his analysis about the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, former Iranian president Mohamed Khatami cited the political and social conditions prevailing in the two countries. He attributed the situation in Tunisia to dictatorship, tyranny and anti-religious sentiments. As for Egypt, he focused on the regime's corruption and compliance with foreign powers.<sup>(9)</sup> Khatami also cited Egypt's history and ancient civilisation, asserting that they have greatly impacted the Egyptian revolution and exhibited Egypt as analogous to Iran.

In this regard, Khatami appraised the ranks of both Egypt and Tunisia in the Islamic world. He described the two countries as representing the Islamic world's "pair of wings", adding that in the absence of either of them, the Islamic world would not be able to "fly". He noted that each of the two countries enjoyed a rich cultural heritage combining an ancient civilisation dating back to thousands of years and an Islamic intellectual centre. "If Iran has a rival, it would be Egypt. If Egypt has an equal, it would be Iran", Khatami asserted. He spoke about common features of the Islamic movements in Iran and Egypt, such as the reappearance of religious fervour, patriotic devotion and intent to confront foreign domination, injustice, imperialism and Western hegemony. Khatami also referred to the impact of deteriorating economic conditions on the revolution in Egypt but he underscored the sentiment of "contempt" originating primarily from dictatorship. He had warned earlier the Egyptian Islamists from applying an extremist model in the name of religion. He had also warned patriotic movements in general from adopting the Western model that would eventually undermine religion. Finally, he asserted that Egypt was in need of an Islamic regime resembling that of Iran.

## **From Support to Criticism and Censure**

Iran has continued attempts to develop its relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood despite differences over several issues. At the forefront lies its position on the Syrian revolution. Iran has expressed its desire to convey the Iranian model to the revolutionary Brotherhood. Dr Ali Akbar Velayati, Iran's Foreign Minister and Former Senior Adviser to the Iranian government's Supreme Guide, Ali Khamenei, has approved this trend when

he said the Muslim Brotherhood was, among all Islamist groups, very close to Tehran.(10) However, he added that "Egyptians today need a system that resembles our Islamic velayat-e-faqih [Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist]." The Muslim Brotherhood has categorically rejected this gesture, saying "Egypt has its own circumstances and policies and does not follow the policies of any other state".(11)

After Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi was ousted, Iran criticised the Brotherhood's government performance and held them accountable for the incumbent military coup in Egypt. "Last year, the Egyptian people went to the polls several times and approved the constitution, but those who took the reins of power in Egypt did not perform competently, and paved the way for the coup".(12)

Leader of the Friday prayer in Tehran, Ahmad Khatami, also criticised the group, arguing that they had "supported extremist groups or remained silent about them, rather than calling for the unity of the Islamic world. They erred in distinguishing friends from foes, dealt harshly with Iran and promoted further Iran-phobia and Shi'a-phobia".(13)

What distinguishes the Iranian model, despite its confusing and contradictory nature, is that Iran has maintained an ideological approach and insisted that "the Arab people need the Iranian model by applying the principle of 'religiously sanctioned rule of the people'". Iran views the Muslim Brotherhood's failure in Egypt as a result of their "refusal to follow the Islamic Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's advice". These views were aired from the pulpits of the Friday prayers,(14) when Khatami, called on the Brotherhood to reassess their political and religious ideology, "as their poor performance had created a fertile ground for the Egyptian army to overthrow Morsi".(15) Ayatollah Emami-Kashani gave another sermon on 'the catastrophe that befell Egypt' in the absence of the velayat-e-faqih system.(16) While imams of mosques provide readily prepared solutions to the problems of the Egyptian people, the Iranian press was busy publicising Khamenei's earlier statements about the 'religiously sanctioned rule of the people' and warning the people about confusing "Islamic democracy, which values commitment to Islamic principles, with Western anti-religious democracy".(17)

Initially, Iran became busily engaged in a 'retaliatory' reaction, celebrating the Muslim Brotherhood's fall, sometimes timidly and at other overtly. Iran has not forgotten Morsi's speech in which he challenged the Shiite intellectual establishment in its own backyard, and his criticism of the Islamic Republic's role in Syria. During his brief 4-hour visit to Tehran, Morsi evaded a meeting with the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. A quick reading of what happened in Egypt was marked by a regretful tone, as Morsi's speech

fell short of Iran's expectations after he declined to take a "hard-line stance on Israel". According to Khamenei, Morsi recanted his own initiative to resolve the crisis in Syria peacefully, and instead made a lot of mistakes and was finally branded as 'inefficient and arrogant'.(18) The Fars News Agency published an analysis by an Iranian expert on the Middle East affairs, Mohammad Reza Moradi, who refuted attempts to link Chavez's temporary overthrow in Venezuela with what happened in Egypt. Moradi advised the Muslim Brotherhood to "accept the realities and advise their followers to withdraw from the streets if they wanted to keep abreast with the political process in Egypt. His rationale was that "the movement would not be able to confront the majority of the Egyptian people". However, he said that "the Muslim Brotherhood has likely reached this conclusion, and its determination to stay in the streets was an instrument of pressure to win concessions from the military in any possible future negotiations".(19)

Iran's welcoming impulse, more or less, was followed by a pause and retraction to review the scene in another way: "What is happening in Egypt indicates a political shift towards the Arab moderation axis", a return that, somehow, would not be in Iran's interest. Although it did not change its tone – and continued to blame the Brotherhood – Iranian observers became apprehensive about an opportunity that became a threat. They now saw what they once called 'the Islamic Awakening' as an insomnia that haunts the Islamic Ummah.

Iran has been counting on good relations with Egypt, viewing the Islamist party as a 'competent' contributor to influential relations through which Iran's influence in Africa may be promoted in one way or another. But the military coup gave the army full control of the course of events and future relations. This is the same Egyptian army that oversaw thirty years of estrangement between Iran and Egypt and played a major role in the abortion of all attempts at rapprochement, whether by intellectuals or partisans and politicians from both sides.

After the 'celebratory' outburst following Morsi's fall subsided, Iranian voices began to resound with warnings against the consequences of allowing a political situation to develop, while the military establishment cooperated with secular powers to reverse Egypt's 'Islamic' orientation.

Iran has described the revolution in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain and Yemen as 'divine empathy' that must 'completely end the domination of the enemies'. Nonetheless, there was fear of the results in several countries. This was clearly shown in a letter by Iranian leader Habibollah Asgaroladi to the Muslim Brotherhood, published by Resalat

newspaper. Asgaroladi attributed the causes of the Egyptian crisis to the political naivety in which the group dealt with the United States when it reversed its cautious attitude toward the latter. Asgaroladi predicted that the Islamist crisis would extend beyond Egypt's borders to Turkey and other countries, thus prompting a review of the Brotherhood's path and the recent mistakes they made.(20)

Iran also responded with similar apprehension to the Libyan revolution's course after the NATO's intervention. It described several revolutions as unfinished or 'standing in the middle of the road', as is the case in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen. Iranian analysts tried to explain this further(21)

- **Tunisia:** The revolution's leaders confronted each other and abandoned their revolutionary goals. Complaints over long-term problems that plagued Tunisia have been reiterated.
- **Libya:** The NATO's intervention threw the country into chaos, so much so that no achievements could be attributed to the revolution as the situation became much worse than it was before the uprising.
- **Yemen:** The absence of unity among the Yemenis and the multiplicity of directions made it difficult for former to put an end to Saleh's dictatorial regime. Later, Iran invested in its relationship with the Houthi rebels, who turned against the legitimate government and took control of Sana'a. Thus, they dragged Yemen into a new cycle of violence.
- **Egypt:** Following the general elections, the coup against the first democratically-elected president circumvented the January 25 revolution's demands.

According to Iran's analysis, the common factors linking these revolutions are as follows: 'The revolutions, though diverse in terms of claims, all lack a unified command. This is contrary to cases of all other revolutions that triumphed under a single command. Without Khomeini's leadership, rebels in Iran would not have managed to fly the revolution's flag, while the continuation of Iran's revolution today has been attributed to velayat-e-faqih. "Had it not been for the velayat-e-faqih, Iran would have turned into a situation worse than that of Iraq, with an outcome similar to that of Egypt".(22)

### **Bahrain: 'Divine' Support**

The most common Iranian characterisation of the Bahrain protests, which erupted in February 2011, was 'the right revolution in the right place'. During the past few years, the Iranian discourse varied between denying the intervention, which was issued more than once by the Supreme Leader, and the threat directed by Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani to the Government of Bahrain.



In a Friday sermon on 3 February 2012, Khamenei said: "Bahrain's revolution will be victorious with the help of God...and to accuse us of interfering is a downright lie...If we intervened, the situation would have been different".(23) Years later, the Revolution's Guide reaffirmed Iran's non-interference in an interview on Eid al-Fitr (in July 2016): "We do offer advice, but we do not interfere".(24)

Khamenei has described the Bahraini government's decision to revoke the citizenship of Bahraini opposition figure Sheikh Isa Qassim(25) as 'foolish'.(26) General Soleimani warned Bahrain's government of "armed rebellion, if Isa Qassim is hurt".(27) Soleimani's threat carries two messages:

1. Protests in Bahrain will not remain peaceful.
2. Bahrain's Shi'a will not be left without effective external support.(28)

While some prominent Iranian religious authorities reserve their comments and deal with all of the Arab revolutions with caution, they were clearly outspoken and supportive towards the protests in Bahrain.(29) At the same time, Ayatollah Safi Golpaygani (a well known and generally accepted religious authority in Shi'a Islam) saw the demonstrations in Bahrain as similar to the revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Libya, but with Western imperialism aided by regional governments to suppress them. Ayatollah Sobhani criticised 'the Organisation of Islamic Conference's silence and denial of support to the Bahraini people'.

The Iranian attitude towards Bahrain is based on a combination of factors. One of which is the historical perspective and the religious sect as well as Iran's traditional policy toward enemies and friends, the environment, and the dominating mentality. Iran does not view its relationship with Bahrain as separate from the soft power that it has adopted there.(30) The expansion or decline of Iranian influence in the region seems to depend on the existence of alliances or enmities in the region, particularly the existing relationship between Iran and Iraq, and the potential relationship between Iran and Bahrain. This significantly undermines international threats to Iran, primarily that of the United States.(31) This has been successfully achieved by the nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 group. Consequently, the Bahraini situation is of high importance to Iranian decision makers in terms of both ideological discourse and strategic interests.

Iranian analysts agree that "the Bahraini regime's fall would open the door for a Shiite government that would strengthen Iran's position and weaken that of Saudi Arabia and

the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. It would also create obstacles for US bases in the region", (32) which would enhance Iran's strategic power.

Iran's policy towards Bahrain differs from its policy towards other Arab countries as it involves a security challenge for Iran in the Gulf region linked to Western military bases in Bahrain. The challenge increases with the presence of Saudi troops in Bahrain which Iran views as a Shiite country. The resulting deep sympathy within Iran towards the Bahraini protests has been attributed to this factor. (33)

The nature of Iran's relations with Bahrain makes it difficult for observers to deal with. Most proposals put forward via discussions and papers on the issue of Bahrain reflected calls to immediately address the issue from a security perspective to limit the influence of regional and international players and provide ideological support within a long-term strategic vision to counter potential national security threats to Iran. (34)

**Most Iranian proposals suggested by research papers, conferences and workshops have directed decision makers on Bahrain to focus on the following:**

- The need to support the Islamic Awakening in Bahrain and a democratic transition because a democratic majority would enable the Shiite sect to rule Bahrain. (35)
- By employing its foreign policy, Iran has to prove to the GCC countries that without the participation of Iran and Iraq, the GCC's security system would be flawed and useless.
- The Islamic Republic seeks to convince the Gulf people that the GCC, led by Saudi Arabia and supported by the West, was created to stand against Iran. (36)
- The need to provide moral and material support for Bahrain's Shiites

## **The Revolution Iran Has Fought**

The Islamic Republic of Iran has not welcomed the Syrian revolution with the same enthusiasm with which it hailed other Arab uprisings. Iranian rhetoric quickly excluded the Syrian case from the realm of revolutions that it previously labelled as part of the Islamic Awakening, and exhibited a sort of pride over it because it "carried the spirit of the Iranian Islamic Revolution and the continuity of the Iranian people's steadfastness". (37) Although some Iranian voices (38) used the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions to emphasise their argument for the "religiously sanctioned rule of the people" and warn against confusing "Islamic democracy which values commitment to Islamic principles with anti-religious Western democracy", the same voices condemned the Syrian revolution and warned of its consequences. (39)

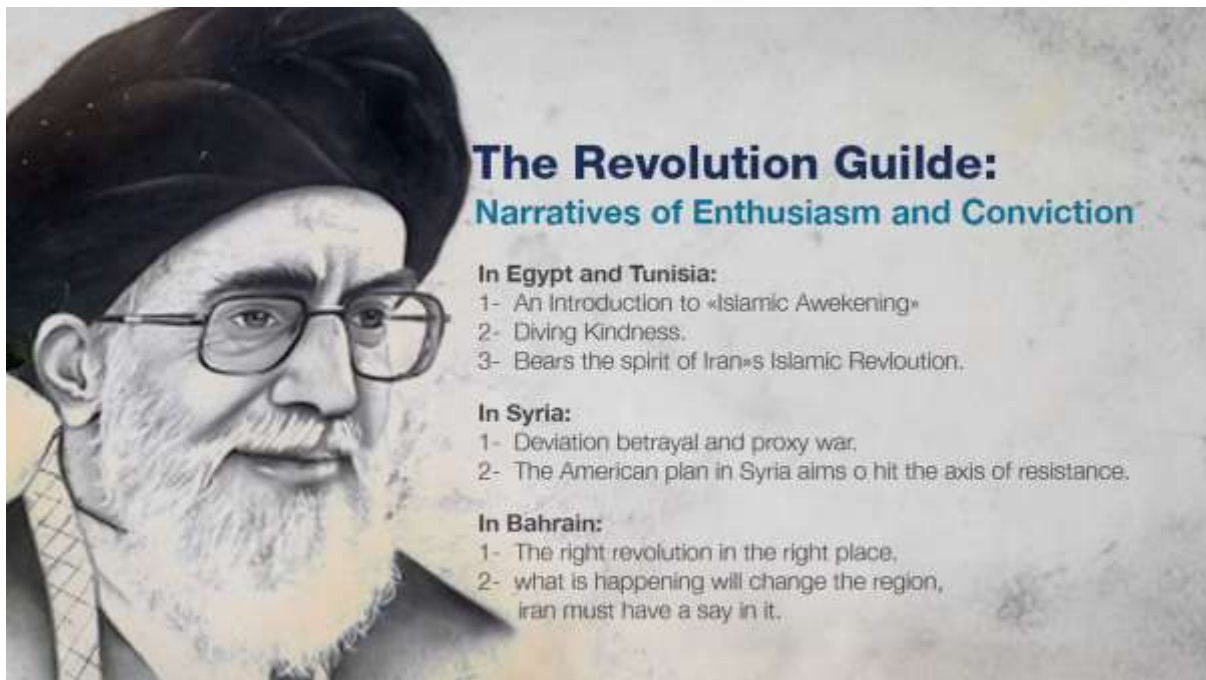
Iran, represented by the Supreme Leader of the Revolution; government officials; military leaders; MPs and religious authorities, did not hesitate to declare a pro-regime stance since the Syrian revolution's outset. The Iranian regime has partially reproduced the Syrian storyline, adding a clear Iranian dimension to it in understanding and evaluation. **Meanwhile, Iran's media and television channels focused on a range of notions, including:**

- The Syrian revolution does not enjoy the legitimacy of other Arab revolutions
- The Syrian revolution has links with the outside world and aims to undermine the "resistance" in Syria
- The Syrian government has tightened control of the situation, and it will never meet the fate of Ben Ali, Mubarak or Gaddafi.
- The Iranian narrative described the Syrian situation with terms similar to those used against Iran's domestic protests following the 2009 presidential elections, such as "sedition", "treachery" and "foreign-aided plotting".
- Iranian support for the Assad regime began with political propaganda and soon turned into financial and military support. As revealed in a leaked report, Iran's urgent financial assistance to Syria totalled \$600 million to prevent its economic collapse. Iran's military support began initially with "military advisers", as defined by Iranian media, but later culminated into direct participation by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Forces (the Quds Brigade). The Iranian forces suppressed Syrian protesters and later brought armed Afghani, Pakistani and Iraqi Shiite militias to fight under the umbrella of Iran's Revolutionary Guard.

## **The Source of the Narrative: The Supreme Leader**

The Supreme Leader's narrative is the "mother" of all generated narratives depending on each case.

The Leader of the Islamic Revolution's position on the Syrian revolution began with condemnation and scepticism,(40) then deliberate disregard(41) and then the former once again, condemning and criminalising the Syrian revolution.



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**Within this narrative is the following:**

- The US plan in Syria originally aimed to strike the axis of "resistance" in the region because Syria defends the Palestinian and the Lebanese resistances
- Iran defends any reforms in the people's interest and opposes intervention by the United States and its allies in Syria's internal affairs(42)
- What is happening in Syria is a "deviation" and a proxy war,(43) but what is happening in Bahrain is "the right revolution in the right place"(44)
- Iran cooperates with all those who fight terrorism in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. Moreover, it fights Zionism(45)

It is obvious that questions about the morality of the Iranian support for the Assad regime and the contradictory nature of Iran's suggestions in this context have posed concern and a challenge to the proponents of the source of the narrative. Aware that this was a crucial point, the Supreme leader dedicated a significant portion of his response to the issue during his speeches and meetings. He deliberately revoked the stance on the Syrian revolution in addition to other stances, depending on the specific details of each case. While doing this, however, the commitment to "supporting revolutions" has been maintained while the emphasis of the term "Islamic Awakening" remains in conformity with and continuity of the Iranian slogans, as per the agenda posted on Khamenei's official website.

To eliminate any contradictions, the Syrian revolution has been excluded from the list of revolutions and stripped of any content that would characterise it as a 'revolution', and

the Syrians were removed from the "vulnerable" list. The content was replaced with different attributes such as deviation, sedition, treason, proxy war and other qualities that make Iran's mission less difficult in this respect.

Question	Answer
<b>1. What are the roots of the Islamic Awakening?</b>	Revival of pride and human dignity under Islam
<b>2. Why are the regional uprisings considered Islamic?</b>	Islamic nations oversee justice, freedom, and the rule of the people within an Islamic framework, unlike other schools.
<b>3. What are the enemies' strategy to confront the Islamic Awakening?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Invoking discord among Muslims</li> <li>- Aborting revolutions</li> <li>- Simulating revolutions in Iran and Syria</li> <li>- Stripping intellectuals from their rational reference sources</li> </ul>
<b>4. What are the foundations of the revolutions in the region?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The revival and renewal of national pride and dignity</li> <li>- Defiance toward intervention and domination and upholding Islam</li> </ul>
<b>5. What is the role of the "distinguished" figures in the leadership of these revolutions?</b>	Finding a line of thought; inclusive discourse and a unifying intellectual trend
<b>6. What is the historical significance of the Islamic Awakening?</b>	The path we are on will change the world's history and political profile.
<b>7. What is the relationship between the Islamic Awakening movement and Occupy Wall Street?</b>	The youth who protested on Wall Street were inspired by the movement of the youth in Egypt and Tunisia as well as by the fighters of Hezbollah and Hamas.
<b>8. Are the region's revolutions a US conspiracy?</b>	The United States could not have found better allies than Mubarak and Ben Ali. It could not have mobilised the people on the street to remove them.
<b>9. Which is more important: the parties or the people?</b>	The most important element in these revolutions is the actual participation of the people in the jihad and resistance.
<b>10. What are the priorities achieved by the revolutions?</b>	Establishing a system based on Islamic principles

<p><b>11. How should the correct path of the Islamic Awakening be understood?</b></p>	<p>Through the stance on the Palestinian issue</p>
<p><b>12. What are the prospects for the Islamic Awakening?</b></p>	<p>The ultimate goal must not be less than "creating a brilliant Islamic civilisation".</p>
<p><b>13. What is the Islamic Revolution's role in forming the Islamic Awakening?</b></p>	<p>It shows the viability of the religiously sanctioned rule of the people, and the scientific, economic and political progress of Muslims under its leadership.</p>
<p><b>14. What is the relationship between the US discourse and the path of the Islamic Awakening?</b></p>	<p>The US discourse has been determined to stoke despair in the hearts of Muslims.</p>
<p><b>15. What experiences of the Islamic Revolution in Iran could help the Islamic Awakening in other countries?</b></p>	<p>Trust in God, belief in the divine promise of inevitable victory and a reassessment of the concrete gains of the revolution.</p>
<p><b>16. What is Iran's position on the Islamic Awakening?</b></p>	<p>Iran declares its support for and commitment to the peoples' uprisings, the unity of Muslims and Jihad.</p>
<p><b>17. Is the situation in Syria a revolution?</b></p>	<p>The reality of what is happening in Syria is a proxy war against the "resistance axis" which serves the interests of the Zionist entity.</p>
<p><b>18. What is the solution for Syria?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- We support the Syrian people and oppose any form of incitement and foreign intervention.</li> <li>- Any reforms in Syria should be made by the Syrian people at the national level.</li> <li>- Sending arms to irresponsible groups must be stopped.</li> </ul>
<p><b>20. Does Iran plan to export the velayat-e-faqih model?</b></p>	<p>These lies have circulated for thirty years to isolate Iran from the rest of the Muslim world.</p>
<p><b>20. Does Iran support the revolution in Bahrain because it is Shiite?</b></p>	<p>The biggest service offered to the enemies is general support for a movement against tyranny based on a sectarian (Shiite vs. Sunni) approach.</p>

Gradually, the official Iranian narrative took control of the country's overall position on Syria. The few other voices in the Iranian arena at the beginning of the Syrian revolution that gave counter narrations opposing the official narrative eventually faded out. These voices had rejected the official narrative and had called upon the Iranian government to review its position on the revolution,(46) warning of "a stance against the people's will" in Syria. These calls came from prominent academics and former diplomats. They argued that the insistence by the Baath party and its supporters on branding the Syrian protests as 'sedition' was a prelude to a greater sedition that paved the way for a protracted strife and foreign military intervention in Syria. It was embarrassing for the Iranian government to check the Syrian rebels' slogan, "God, Syria, Freedom", and compare it with the Baathist slogan, "God, Syria, Bashar".(47) Iran's silence over the atheistic slogan, "No God but Bashar", was criticised severely(48) because the regime used an "Islamic label" to suppress its opponents. The Iranian regime had vehemently rejected "Neither Gaza, Nor Lebanon" for allegedly being contradictory to the Islamic spirit. At the same time, however, the Iranian regime remained silent over the Syrian regime's atheistic slogans.(49)

### **Military Intervention: The Short-Lived Denial**

Iran used the term "advisers" to deny its military intervention in Syria. According to the Iranian narrative, initially, Iranians in Syria came as military advisers in response to a Syrian government request to assist the government. However, this narrative gradually disappeared following the announcements of the deaths of senior officers in the Revolutionary Guard killed in Syria and elsewhere.

By reviewing statements issued by senior military commanders, one can understand the causes of Iran's intervention in Syria, with Iranian interests at the forefront.

In February 2013, Ammar Foundation president Mehdi Tayeb stated that Syria was the 35th province of Iran. He also admitted that Iran has strategic interests in Syria, the defence of which should be prioritised over that of the province of Khuzestan, saying "because we can retrieve the latter if we lose it, but we cannot retrieve Syria if we lose it, as we would also lose Tehran in that case".(50)

In April 2014, Brigadier General Hossein Hamadani spoke about the importance of providing support to Syria in order to bolster Iran's interests. This statement was soon removed by Fars News Agency but several websites had already republished it. Furthermore, Hamadani stated that "Iran is fighting in Syria because of the interests of

the Islamic Revolution in Syria", calling it a "sacred defence". The 42 brigades and 128 battalions consisting of 70,000 Muslim youth including Alawites, Sunnis and Shiites constitute the mobilisation forces that provide security for Syrian cities and villages. There are 130,000 other Mobilisation Resistance Forces waiting for permission to go to Syria.(51)

In mid-May 2014, Mohammad Eskandari, commander of the Revolutionary Guard in Malayer region, said "Our fight today in Syria is a fight against America in Syrian territory". He confirmed the existence of 42 brigades and 138 battalions fully equipped to fight the enemy.(52)

In March 2016, Brigadier General Ali Arsta, coordinator in the Iranian ground forces, stated that special ground troops from Brigade 65 and others had joined the fight in Syria.(53) Soon came the news that one of these troupes, Mohsen Gheytslou, had been killed in Syria.

One of the most striking narratives about the way Iran intervened in Syria is in a memorial book released on the first anniversary of the killing of Iranian leader Hamadani in Syria.(54) Hamadani had testified that the decision of military intervention came at the recommendation of Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah after Iran introduced him to a plan with cultural, political and economic dimensions. In addition, General Qasem Soleimani had briefed Hamadani about the importance of Nasrallah's approval to the plan. According to Hamadani, Nasrallah said, "Military and security issues are the only priority. Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian regime must be removed from this quagmire. Then we can clean them, dress them, feed them and give them lessons in worship. Now, the strategy must be to pull them out of this quagmire."(55)

**Correspondingly, the book cites Hamadani as saying:**

The Syrian regime was on the verge of falling in 2013. In March [of that year], the terrorists surrounded Bashar al-Assad, attempting to close in on the presidential palace...we moved the families to a safe place...and [al-Assad] started looking for a country where he could take refuge...then I proposed a plan that he approved and executed. I told him, "Open the arms stores and arm the general public"...Praise be to God...this proposal saved the regime from falling.(56)

Then came the news of Brigadier General Hamid Taqavi's death during clashes in Samarra in 2014; and in early 2015, Brigadier General Mohammad Ali Allahdadi was



killed near the Golan Heights. Later on that year, Brigadier General Hossein Hamadani was killed in Aleppo. Those killed, whether of high or lower ranks, indicate the extent of Iran's Revolutionary Guard's military engagement abroad. According to statistics compiled by Iranian journalist and researcher Abdol Salam Salemi, at least 1,310 Iranian soldiers have been killed so far in Syria.(57)

After the Iranian media had deliberately ignored losses in Syria for some time, it started to publish extensive coverage of Iranian Guard commanders and the "shrine defenders" killed in combat operations in Syria. Reporters met with their families and talked about their merits. Iranian officials began to visit their families and take pictures with their children and wives, and glorified their feats. The bereaved families received due attention and care from the Leader of the Islamic Revolution.(58) Most of them were Afghans residing in Iran, and their children had fought in a brigade called Liwa Fatemiyoun ("the Fatimid brigade").

**Among the many statements made by Khamenei regarding these fighters and their families was**

All Iranians are indebted to these families whose children fought to defend hareem ahl al-bayt (the female descendants of Prophet Mohammed) in Syria and Iraq, and confront Iran's enemies abroad. Without this confrontation, those enemies would have entered Iran; without this confrontation, we would be forced to fight them in Kermanshah, Hamedan and other Iranian cities. They sacrificed their lives to defend Iran and the Iranian Islamic revolution. Above all, they died in alienation(59)

The Iranian media stated that the Revolutionary Guard was then active in six fronts: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Afghanistan and Yemen. While Iran has deliberately published pictures of Revolutionary Guard leaders in Syria and Iraq, no photographs of other fronts have been published.(60)

Western analysts estimate the number of Iranian combat forces in Syria to be 16,000 soldiers in addition to of 60,000 multinational Shiite militias fighting Iran's command(61) and Hezbollah, with its independent administrative structure, which is said to have deployed 10,000 soldiers.(62)

## Conflicting Narratives: The War Iran Has Won

Despite the many gaps and contradictions in Iranian narratives, the country has been able to garner the support of the Iranian people for them; and each group has aligned itself with the narrative that concerns it. Those managing the Syrian portfolio in Iran have successfully manipulated the Iranian people's fears. In order to promote their narratives and efforts to persuade, they took advantage of the lack of access to Syrian voices in Farsi that may challenge the government's account, and the distrust in foreign media.(63) Scepticism about the legitimacy of Iran's intervention in Syria did not last long.



[ALJAZEERA]

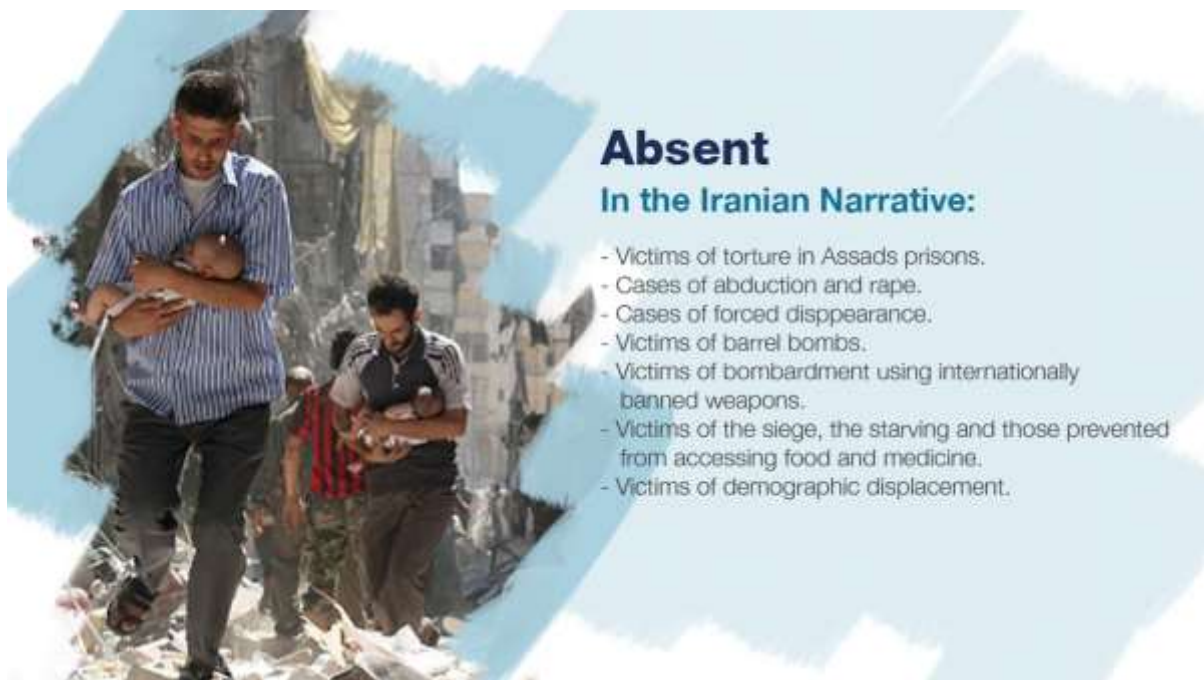
**In fact, it was replaced by alternative themes that vary in circulation and influence, including:**

- The protection of holy shrines (such as the shrine of Sayyidah Zaynab). Mobilisation in this regard was not confined to Iranians but also included Iraqi, Pakistani and Afghan militias.
- The necessity of confronting Takfiris in Syria and Iraq to prevent their infiltration into Iran
- The lack of existence a popular revolution in Syria, and the belief that it is a foreign conspiracy aiming to undermine the "resistance" camp led by Hezbollah.
- What is currently happening will change the region; Iran should have a vision regarding that.

Poll results showed the Iranian government's success in marketing its 'visionary' narratives. This includes a poll conducted by the University of Maryland in which more than 64% of respondents supported Iran's decision to send its military forces to support the Assad regime.(64)

## Those Missing in the Iranian Narrative

The Iranian narrative systematically excludes victims, particularly those of the Assad regime. Those present in it, however, are victims of acts by Takfiri groups and Assad's opponents.



[ALJAZEERA]

### Those missing from the Iranian narrative are:

- Victims of torture in Assad's prisons,(65) including women and children(66)
- Victims of abduction and rape,(67) as well as cases of disappearance following arrest(68)
- Victims of barrel bombs and aerial bombardment using internationally banned weapons(69)
- Victims of siege and starvation(70) unable to access food and medicine in Syrian cities and villages(71)
- Victims of demographic displacement(72)

## **In sum, the Iranian narrative involves the following modules:**

### **The ISIL Module**

- This narrative is based on the existence of ISIL and the justification of Iran's actions and direction based on its ISIL's activities
- The narrative excludes the two years of the Syrian revolution in which ISIL was not present in Syria and disregards the six months of peaceful protests against the regime.
- In this narrative, the confrontation appears to be between the Assad regime (which is portrayed as secular and civilised) supported by Iran and Russia on one hand and ISIL (which is portrayed as reactionary and brutal) on the other.
- Also, the narrative does not mention the current confrontation between ISIL and the Syrian rebels that oppose al-Assad, and that the expansion of ISIL came at the expense of these rebel groups. ISIL's battles against al-Assad's regime are barely mentioned.

### **The Foreign Intervention Module**

- This narrative is based on the premise that what happened in Syria was foreign intervention conspiring to harm Syria by targeting the regime.
- Al-Assad has been targeted because of his position against the Zionist entity.
- The narrative links "opponents of al-Assad" to "major powers", i.e. the United States and Israel.
- Iranian and Russian military interventions have been humanised and welcomed, while other interventions were demonised.
- Targeting Syria is in fact targeting Hezbollah in order to encircle and cut off its support sources for the sake of the Zionist entity.

### **The Crucial Fight Against Terrorism and the New Iran**

With Hassan Rouhani's ascension to the presidency in Iran in 2013, and the change in Iran's relationship with the West in general and the United States in particular, Iran began to cooperate with Washington on many issues, at the forefront of which was the "anti-terrorism campaign".(73) This issue, with its regional interactions, has been used to prove Iran's effectiveness as an important and fundamental player.

The Iranian public has applauded the slogan of "fighting terrorism". After Iran cooperated with the United States in Afghanistan under this pretext, it intended to do the same in Iraq. Despite the acknowledgment that the situation in Afghanistan has become a vast geopolitical game, the Iraqi regime's collapse indicated the failure of

Iranian politics as well as US policy. Although Iran was inclined to embark on such a path, replication has been challenging, particularly due its domestic and regional consequences. Hence, it seems that the "anti-terrorism" mantra is an effort necessary to legitimise this cooperation for public opinion and justify intervention outside Iran. This is the same line that connects interests between Tehran and Moscow for the latter's military intervention in Syria. The pros of the anti-terrorism campaign go far beyond Iran's relations with the United States to its relations with the entire world. Nowadays, Iran "speaks the same language that the world speaks", providing an opportunity to change its image in the eyes of the world. While the Arab world became deeply mired in its divisions and problems, and its key players adopted loose strategies, Iran appears to be calm and stable, and embracing a solid strategy.(74) What helps to create the desired image here is that for the first time in Iran's social history, most of Iran's citizens are educated and live in cities. Furthermore, Iran enjoys a political space which is not available in any Arab state.(75)

Iranian concern and opposition to the international coalition against ISIL did not prevent Iran from 'security cooperation' and investment in the fight against the former, tightening its control in Iraq, and confrontation in Syria.

In the beginning of the 2003 US occupation of Iraq, Iran was keen on keeping its security and military presence a secret. At the end of 2013 and throughout 2014, the course of events began to reveal an Iranian presence that goes beyond alleged efforts to help Iraq recover. Far beyond its influence in political circles, Iran culminated its military presence to intervention. Then, it got involved in the holding of funerals for several members of the Iranian Guard killed in Iraq. Iranian propaganda has deliberately focused on General Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force in the Revolutionary Guard Forces, who is in charge of foreign missions. He was celebrated in a picture with Kurdish fighters facing ISIL.

For many reasons, and most importantly to ensure the support of Shiite public opinion, the Iranian narrative focused initially on justifying Iran's intervention in Iraq for reasons related to the protection of the holy shrines in Samarra, Najaf and Karbala. But in reality, the intervention surpasses the religious sphere to the political scene. The development of the situation in Iraq and the rise of ISIL provided opportunities for Iran to prove its claims as a major force in the Middle East, which should be recognised as a key player in resolving regional dilemmas. This is what prompted ten countries to officially request its assistance in the face of ISIL.(76)

After the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, Iran played a significant role in training and arming Shiite militia factions and anti-American Sunni groups.(77) As the United States began its withdrawal in 2011 from the country, which by then had been experiencing acute sectarian divisions, the latter entered a phase of serious transformations, most notably the rise and expansion of ISIL in 2014. These developments created joint Iranian and US targets in Iraq.

Although Iran used this approach to obtain more political advantage in Syria and Iraq, it also used it for other portfolios, particularly the nuclear deal, and sought to add a human dimension, declaring "the world has realised that the first country to help the Iraqi people in the fight against extremism and terrorism was the Islamic Republic of Iran".(78)

Despite this cooperation, the Iranian narrative needed to retain its anti-US sentiment and question the United States' seriousness in the fight against "terrorism", according to its chosen definition, particularly with regard to rebel groups fighting the Assad regime.(79)

### **The Mahdism Polarity: The Government of Imam Al-Zaman**

The Mahdist mission is common among various Iranian factions of different political affiliations and cultural attitudes, ranging from the general populist trend to the elites, such as university professors, politicians and clerics. The discourse also appears among figures associated with the Revolutionary Guard and. **According to this discourse:**

- The conditions in the Middle East are not at all suitable for Imam Al-Zaman's emergence there. This is why these developments should occur as a prelude.
- The government that most resembles the government of Imam Al-Zaman is that of velayat-e-faqih in Iran.
- The Middle East is the centre of support for Imam Al-Zaman's emergence.
- The US occupation of Iraq came to confront the phenomenon of Mahdism.
- The largest burden for paving the way for Imam Al-Zaman's emergence rests with the Supreme Leader and the Iranian people.
- The Revolutionary Guard is a tool paving the way for Imam Al-Zaman's emergence; and regionally and internationally, the Quds brigades have the most prominent role in this respect. In terms of building human resources, the Mobilisation Resistance Forces play a major role in securing tens of millions of leaders and individuals to prepare the groundwork for the Imam's emergence.(79)



[ALJAZEERA]

This discourse of Hojjat al-Islam Ali Saeidi, representative of velayat-e-faqih to the Revolutionary Guard, is not confined to him, but it has also been attributed to the "emergence" discourse. The most prominent development is the assignment of these writings to the Revolutionary Guard and the empowerment of it within the power structure. This is particularly important since the provisions of the Iranian Constitution and the laws governing the Revolutionary Guard's work and founding statement do not state these functions, which come as part of a broad slogan: "preparing the earth for Imam Al-Zaman's emergence".(80) This explains the expansion in the Revolutionary Guard's work after the intervention in Syria and Iraq. This organisation is no longer just an Iranian military and security establishment or a revolutionary institution; it has become an ideological, cross-border and multinational institution.

This new ideological framing of the Guard expands its span of work and presence, and legitimises the growth of its influence and presence in Shiite and non-Shiite spheres outside of Iran, according to the emergence narratives. Mecca (as the location of the Imam's emergence, according to the narratives), Yemen and the Levant are all areas for the Revolutionary Guard's work, according to the functionality outlined after the Syrian Revolution.

Within this new "job description", "the discourse of emergence" that targets Saudi Arabia can be understood as this speech links the course of events in Saudi Arabia to the Imam's emergence. For example, this is evident in the statement of Hojjat al-Islam Mohammed Ali Mohsen Alizadeh, representative of the Supreme Leader of the

Revolutionary Guard in Kerman, in a speech at the funeral of Sheikh al-Nimr(81) **that included the following key points:**

- It is based on the special emergence of Imam Mahdi's narratives and his audience inside Iran and among Shiites in general.
- It is based on a narrative that Saudi Arabia wants to delay the Imam's emergence and has therefore been set on killing Shiites.
- It believes that Saudi Arabia remains hostile to Shiites as they know that Shiite youth would respond to the Imam's call in Mecca.
- It speaks about the signs of the Mahdi's emergence, starting from the liberation of Karbala, followed by the "liberation" of Mecca followed by Jerusalem.

This statement summarises the Guard's position and role: Qasem Soleimani is one of Imam al-Mahdi's soldiers.(82)

Different circles of power inside Iran support this framing and legitimisation of the Guard's international presence. The Guard is now present in the Shura Council, influential ministries (particularly the Foreign and Intelligence Ministries), and even the army, which is independent from it. Such power and influence is aligned with an economic powerhouse as the Guard is in control of all major economic projects in the field of oil and gas.

Perhaps this new framing justifies the "belligerent attitude" in the Revolutionary Guard's work,(83) as it gives them the right to work in the Sunni squares, which initiates an unprecedented Sunni-Shiite conflict in the region.

The "holy position" given to the Guard within the scope of its presence in Syria extends its profile to the "Guard for the Awaited Imam".



## From the "Imam Al-Zaman Army" to the "Free Shiite Army"



Soon after the inception of "Imam Al-Zaman Army", the "Free Shiite Army" was announced. In both cases, Syria comes as both a pretext and a tool. This new formation's features look clearly sectarian, as stated in an interview by Mashreq News with General Mohammad Ali Falaki,(84) defined by the website as a front leader in Syria.

### **The interview points can be summed as follows:**

- There is weakness in Syria on which Falaki chose not to elaborate, but attributed to the weakness within Iran.
- Iran went to southern Lebanon, Bahrain and Yemen to defend the Shiites
- Iran has been able to protect 3 million Shiites in Afghanistan.
- The "Free Shiite Army" has fronts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen led by Commander of the Quds Force Qasem Soleimani.
- This army is under the Supreme Leader's authority.
- In addition to Iranians, this army contains different peoples of the region.
- The Afghan Liwa Fatimiyoun is at the forefront of the battle in Syria, offering its members a stipend no more than \$100 a month.
- There are 2 million Afghans in Iran. The Afghans' courageous fighting in Syria has reversed the stereotypes about them in the Iranian society.

- Other militias are fighting in Syria including the Pakistani Liwa Zainebiyoun, the Iraqi Haidariyoun, and Hezbollah (composed of the Syrian Hezbollah and the Lebanese Hezbollah).
- The majority of the Syrian Hezbollah's volunteers are Syrians in Damascus, Nubl and Zahra. They are fighting under the command of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard in a unified organisation in terms of uniform and flag.
- There are also Sunni volunteers under the command of the Guard.

**The army's objectives include the following:**

- To unite the Shiites in the region.
- To unite the militias and the military arm of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard in the region such as in Syria, Yemen and Iraq under Iranian leadership in order to direct operations and organise battles, thus undermining the negative aftermaths of combat operations.(85)
- To protect holy sites and Shiite shrines throughout the Middle East
- To create a generation that believes in the necessity of eradicating Israel in 23 years.(86)

## What has Iran lost?

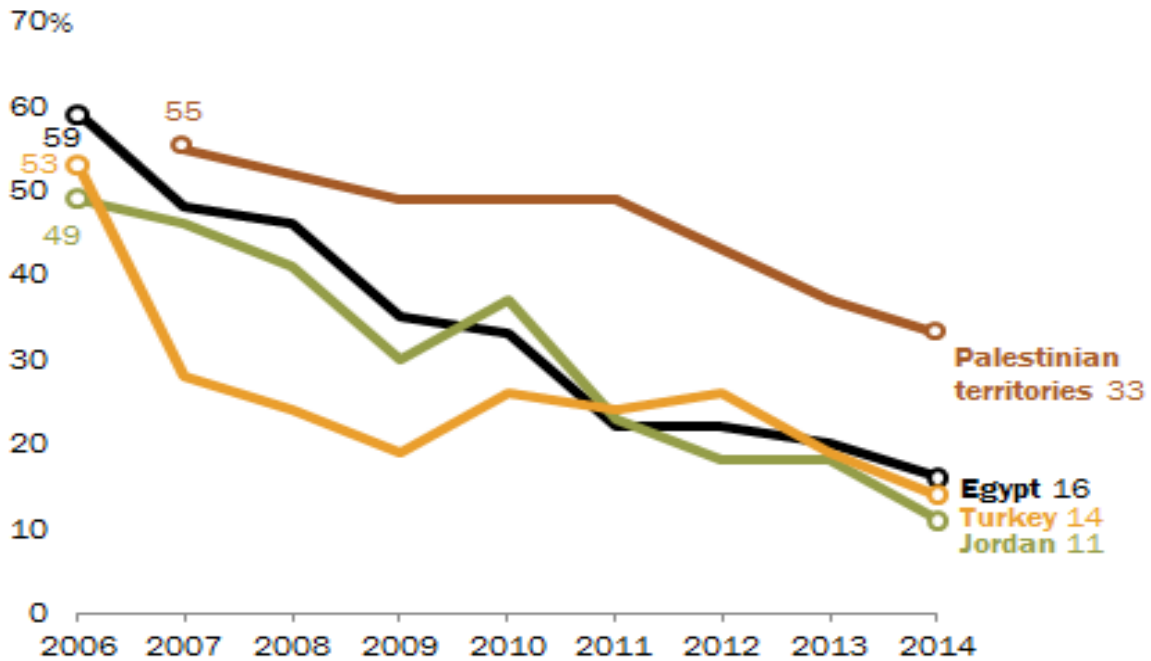
Iran has been able to market its narrative at home and abroad, but this has come with big losses in terms of soft power and failures in the moral and ethical spheres. This is clearly evident in Iran's image in the Arab world in particular, where it has been relegated from being largely popular among Arabs to a being branded as an "occupier". A quick review of opinion polls conducted by several institutions on Iran's popularity reveals its rapid erosion, and the reason was mainly the intervention in Iraq and Syria. The results of a poll conducted by the Zogby International Institution at the University of Maryland in 2006 shows Hassan Nasrallah, Secretary General of Lebanese Hezbollah, as the most beloved leader in the Arab world. Former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad ranked third, followed by Former Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.(87). Some 85% of respondents said Israel was the greatest threat followed by the United with 72%, while only 11% of respondents said Iran posed the biggest threat.(88)

Another study conducted by PEW Research Centre for the period of 2006–2014 shows the significant negative transformation of Iran's image among the peoples of the region as shown in the figure below:

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## Declining Ratings for Iran in Middle East

*Favorable view of Iran*



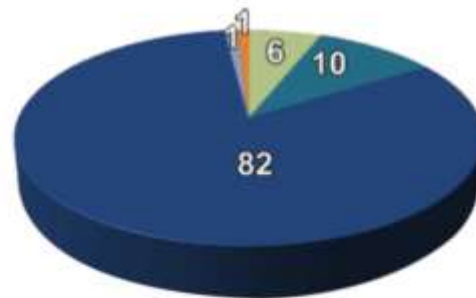
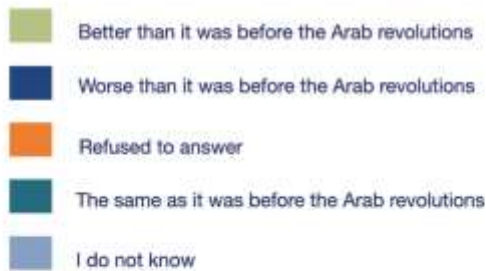
Source: Spring 2014 Global Attitudes survey. Q15c.

**PEW RESEARCH CENTER**

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To the general public, Iran has lost its position among the elites in the Arab world. The results of an opinion poll conducted by Al Jazeera Centre for Studies showed a significant decline in Iran's popularity. The results also showed that the policy pursued by Iran towards the Arab Spring revolutions had a negative impact on its image among the Arab elites. A significant majority of respondents, 82%, said Iran's image had become even worse than it was before the Arab Spring, as opposed to only 6% that believed its image had improved, and 10% that said it remained the same. Meanwhile, 2% did not state their opinions or refused to take part.

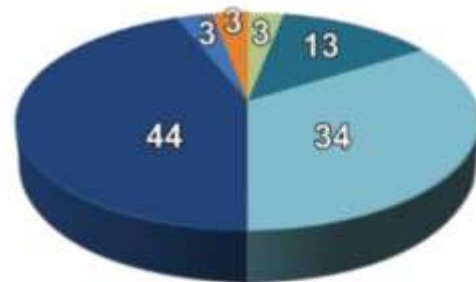
## Iran's image in the Arab world after the Arab revolutions:



[ALJAZEERA]

The results also revealed that the majority had assessed the Iranian position through its policies in Syria. Iran's position on the revolution in Syria in particular and other Arab countries in general were two important reasons behind its declining image.

## Iran's position on the "Arab Spring" revolutions



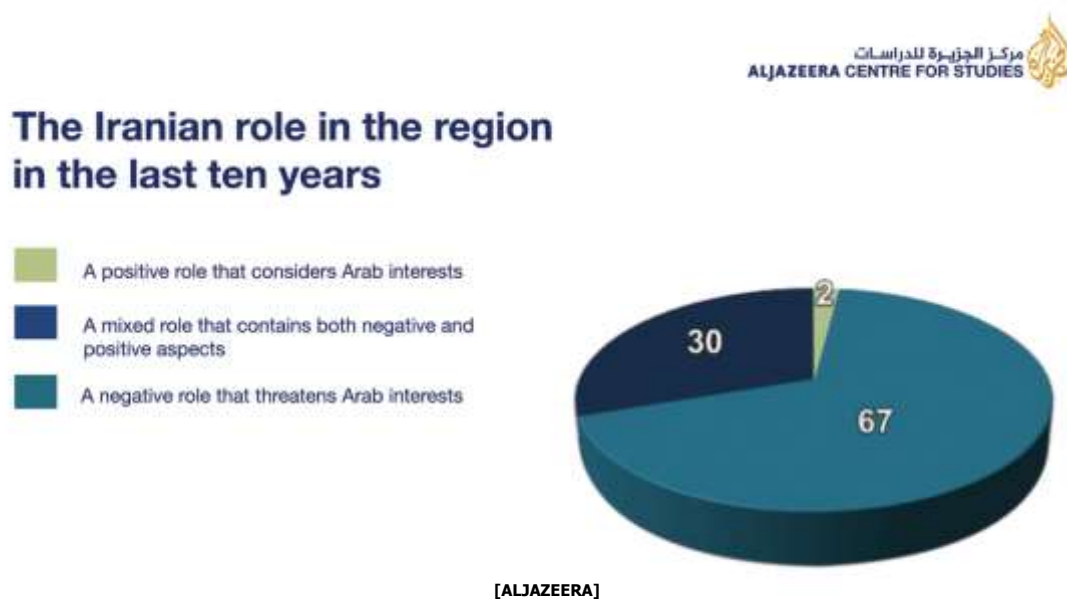
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The results showed that 78% of respondents believed that Iran's stances on the Arab Spring revolutions were negative (44% very negative and 34% relatively negative) compared to 16% who saw Iran's position as positive (3% very positive and 13% relatively positive). Meanwhile, 6% did not take part in the opinion poll or refused to answer.

### The 78% that held a negative view cited the following reasons:

- Iran intervened politically and militarily to support despotism and derail the Syrian revolution (37%).
- Iran acted with opportunism and offset its interests (25%).
- Iran considered the Arab Spring threatening to its plans (12%).
- Iran tried to employ Arab revolutions to serve its objectives (12%).
- Iran has augmented sectarian conflicts (5%).
- Iran supported some revolutions and opposed others (2%).
- 6% withheld their reasons.

For these reasons and others, Arab elites consider Iran's role threatening to Arab interests:



Arab elites have assessed Iran's role in the region over the past decade from the perspective of Arab interests. According to the results, 67% of respondents believe Iran's role has been passive and threatens Arab interests, as opposed to 30% who feel the role contains both positive and negative aspects, while only 2% consider it a positive role that takes into account Arab interests. The results also showed that 69% of respondents were worried about Iran's rise as a regional power after forging its nuclear agreement with the West, compared to 30% who showed no concern with this issue. One per cent did not show their opinions or refused to answer. Over 70% of respondents expressed concern about the expansion of Iran's influence after the signing of the nuclear agreement between Iran and the 5+1 group, while 29% of them were not worried about this. Two per cent did not share their opinions or refused to answer.

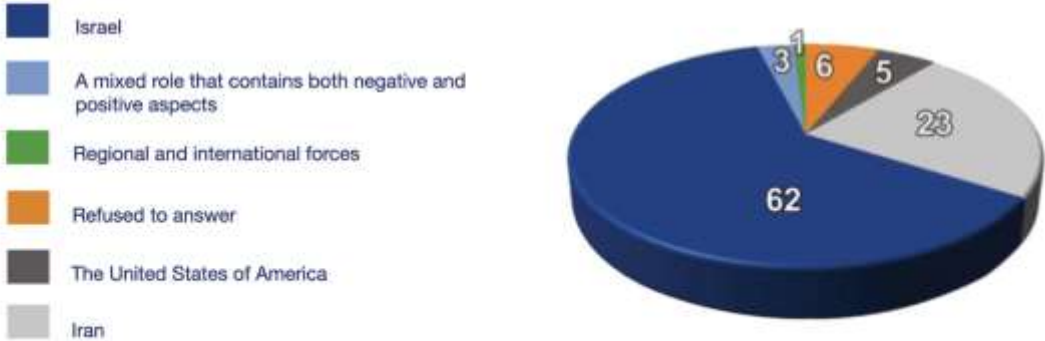
These results have indicated a pessimistic outlook for future Arab–Iranian relations. Some 84% of respondents supported the view that these relations tended to create more tension, as opposed to 14% that did not support this view.

As a result of its policies, Iran has joined the list of countries that threaten the Arab world. The Arab Index poll results showed trends of respondents on the sources most expected to threaten their countries, 45% said that Israel is topping the countries threatening their countries’ security, while 22% chose the United States, compared to 10% who said that Iran is the biggest threat to their countries.

Following the Arab Index poll results, the Arab elites’ poll showed that Israel represented the top threat to the Arab world, according to 62% of respondents. Meanwhile, Iran came ahead of the United States, ranking as the second threat at 23% of respondents, followed by the latter at 5%, the ruling Arab regimes at 3%, and regional and international powers at 1%. Six per cent did not take part in the opinion poll or refused to answer.



**Which country is considered the greatest threat to the "Arab world"?**



[ALJAZEERA]

**The Grand Narrative: Building Iran’s Monopolism**

One cannot understand Iranian policies toward the developments in the Arab world, particularly where they pertain to the revolution in Tunisia. This is apart from what Iran has been trying to build for years, that is, the paradigm(89) of Iran’s polarity in its relations with its Muslim neighbours and the world. Iran’s relationship with Saudi Arabia is one problem Iran faces in its efforts to lead the Muslim world. Relevant to this problem are Iran’s calls to internationalising the supervision of hajj (pilgrimage).



[ALJAZEERA]

The narrative of Iran's polarity also governs its position on the Palestinian issue. The value of this polarity is not worth anything without the question of Palestine. In the same context, support for the largest Sunni resistance faction in Palestine, Hamas, is part and parcel of this narrative's structure that gives legitimacy to Iran as a leader of the whole Muslim world, not just Shiites.

The main objective of this paradigm which is embodied in a range of qualities and characteristics with ethnic, cultural and spiritual relevance is to formulate the basic pillars of Islamic identity in general and Iranian identity in particular, giving Iran a distinctive identity with extra qualities beyond its Islamic identity. This is reflected through a reproduction or re-narration of the past by focusing on the paradigm of the Iranian polarity or the pivotal Iranian Shiite roots to make them a scheme for leadership. In doing so, Iran excluded some partners in the Islamic establishment and marginalised others by pushing them beyond "the range of vision" that Iran has been attempting to control to become the sole representative of Mohammedan Islam.<sup>(90)</sup> Other Muslims have been classified as followers of "American Islam". Iran also aspires to become the sole country that sets classification standards for the Muslim world and reclassify Muslim countries accordingly.

The chaos in the Arab world provides a fertile environment for Iran to move and build its desired Iranian polarity paradigm in the form of a new Middle East in accordance to the international game of the day, as Iranian decision makers do not seem to like the

current balance of power. The weakness in the countries that maintained the regional balance of power is a prerequisite for Iran to achieve its polarity, while the peripheral countries remain mere followers. The paradigm appears to be inspired by the paradigm of "Western monopolism" where parties must adapt or submit to the status quo; otherwise, their stubbornness will be very costly, and they will therefore be relegated to the dark side of history,(91) as Francis Fukuyama, who is a leading pioneer of the paradigm of Western monopolism, argues.

The United States achieved a historic victory for Iran when it overthrew the Ba'ath regime in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Iran was tempted to employ the resulting chaos that swept Iraq, Afghanistan and the region to build its polarity in the Muslim world. The Arab revolutions then confused everyone, but Iran chose an approach that would help achieve its desired goal to become an influential country involved in all the region's sensitive issues. So, it continued to invest in "ideology" combined with slogans to justify its policies after the occupation of Iraq, followed by the critical moment that marked "military intervention in Syria". This explains the return to the use of mantras like those used in the early years of the Islamic Revolution (e.g. egotism, belittling, Mohammedan Islam, American Islam, Iran's Islam, errant Islam that goes astray without Iran's guidance, etc.).

According to Barry Buzan's classification, the world is divided into the "centre", "peripheries" and "quasi-peripheries".(92) Here we can preview Iran's quest to establish a centre, peripheries and quasi-peripheries in the Muslim world. In this division, conflict and security issues seem to be topping Iran's quest, as chaos in the peripheries and quasi-peripheries could be employed to achieve security in the "centre". Another added expression points out that the security of the peripheries is stipulated by Iran's role and presence.

The security of the "centre" largely explains the way Iran looks at the human and economic costs of its external military presence which it views as central to its national security. On 29 December 2014, during the funeral of General Hamid Taqavi,(93) a commander in the Revolutionary Guard, Ali Shamkhani, the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, declared: "Taqavi has sacrificed his life so that we do not have to [do so] in Tehran. Had [his supporters] not sacrificed their lives in Samarra, we would have offered ours in Sistan, Azerbaijan, Shiraz and Isfahan".(94)

In the context of building its polarity, Iran sought to expand its presence in several arenas such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and other countries, regarding this as a step



towards changing the region's geopolitics. This was clearly expressed in a statement by deputy commander for the Revolutionary Guard, General Hossein Salami:

In Iraq, we have a popular army linked to the Islamic Revolution. It is ten times the size of Hezbollah in Lebanon the central resistance in Syria [combined]. On the ground, there is a popular army associated with the Islamic Revolution...The sum of such an Ashura-based struggle will alter the balance of power in favour of the Islamic Republic.(95)

Hence, the motto of 'exporting the revolution' becomes an essential prerequisite for achieving this centralism (polarity). Evidence of this 'exportation', Qasem Soleimani says, "is clearly visible after reaching Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, Iraq and even North Africa".(96) But without this support, Iran could not speak of "influence that extends from Yemen to Lebanon".(97)

This development can only be achieved by considering others an opposing factor. The definition of identity in the "Iranian monopolism" can only be achieved through the opposing entity. Ensuring a "strong entity" can only be done by manipulating the weaker entity. Thus, one notices the predominance of a dichotomy in the Iranian discourse.

The duality between "the ego" and "the other" is an old theory of human nature, as indicated by al-Jabri.(98) In the Greek and Roman eras, a citizen recognised his identity through his self-image, as opposed to the alien barbarian image. In the Middle Ages, a European identified himself against the "other" Muslim/Arab. In the modern age, globalisation and communication technology have established the East-West duality within the Western mind. In the relationship between Iran and the Arabs, Iranians recognise their identity through an ethnic and sectarian consciousness and the opposing Arab-Sunni divergence.

## The Elements of the Paradigm

- **Race:** This trend seems to be linked primarily to the theory of ethnic rooting,(99) which argues that Iranians possess a special nature and ethnic characteristics. The ethnic rooting theory will play an active role in defining the future of Iranian claims deeming "Iran's achievements" as the *crème de la crème* of human qualities inherent in their distinct ethnic characteristics. Countering this "supremacy" is a "lesser" contrast, as portrayed in literature and politics, representing Arabs as the inferior race and ignorant and barefoot. In the field of

politics, Arabs are portrayed as followers who have been stripped of their decision-making power.

- **Religion and religious doctrine:** This is parallel to Hegel's analysis based on the hypothesis that Christianity is the best monotheistic religion and the "superlatively absolute religion".(100) In the context of Iran's rhetoric to achieve monopolism, it focuses on the merits of the Twelver Shiite doctrine and the mandate of velayat-e-faqih on other doctrines for establishing a Muslim identity that excels those of other Islamic doctrines.(101)
- **Culture:** Every culture possesses a certain degree of polarity that distinguishes it from other cultures.(102) As part of posing as a hub for the Muslim world and setting the standards for its development and status, Iran is positioning itself in an extreme way in many respects. In this regard, the Iranian culture entails a "normative disparity between its 'ego', which is described as diligent, civilised and familiar with literature, philosophy and science, and that of the ignorant, superficial and backward 'others'".

## The Iranian dream

On the website of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, an analytical article entitled "Geopolitical Strength: Our understanding and perception of the American side" revealed Iran's clear interest in playing a role in shaping the future of global affairs.(103) The article states that the region is progressively reforming, while United States is beginning to falter after having reached its climax and showed its inability to fulfil its obligations and resolve international crises. Instead, it is still a major player in the generation of global crises. Thus, it sought to produce a fake version of Islam, an "American Islam", in the face of "true Mohammedan Islam", creating discord among Muslims. If Muslims fail to embrace "Mohammedan Islam", they will not have a role in the new world order. The article also identifies the Palestinian issue and resistance as a gateway to developing Iran's role.

Iran has dealt with the chaos prevailing in several Arab countries in terms of both opportunity and threat. It sought to invest in the threat and turn it into an opportunity by employing the chaos created by other parties to achieve strategic objectives and enhance its future status and role. Building its image as "Iran, the protector" for its allies in Iraq, Syria Yemen and Lebanon is part and parcel of the spirit of monopolism.

Thus, highlighting the "Soleimani myth" has become a clear Iranian requirement for keeping up with conditions that arose after the occupation of Iraq and the beginning of

Iran's expansion in the region – as we see it nowadays. Soleimani is a legendary figure who fits well in the Arab situation. He has been in the region for a long time, speaks Arabic, and has strong relations with the leaders of Hezbollah, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad. He is also a key figure in addressing Iran's domestic audience and justifying intervention in the Arab region in particular. "To religious people, he is the protector of the Zaynab shrine and an opponent of Israel. To nationalists and those who do not believe in the Islamic Republic, he fights extremism and protects Iran."

Therefore, the Soleimani myth must build Iran's image as "capable", internally and externally, rather than weak and besieged. Internally, even the younger generation of Iranians who do not identify with the first and second phases of the revolution are nevertheless obsessed with the concept of Iranian that Soleimani continuously encourages. Youth blogs and opinion polls in 2015 and 2016 indicated Soleimani's rise in popularity, exceeding even that of President Hassan Rouhani. Externally, this is necessary in an environment that has become weak and soft like the Arab region. Hence, Iran and its allies need to create this mythical image to show that Iran is "capable" and can be "the protector" in the region.

## Conclusions and results

- Iran has developed several narratives about the Arab revolutions with multiple forms, levels and goals.
- Although they are diverse, the narratives are all based on that of the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei.
- Furthermore, although they are contradictory in many aspects, the narratives eventually form the major Iranian narrative of Iran's monopolism in the Muslim world and its "merit" and "sovereign right" to lead the Islamic world.
- An understanding of Iran's policies towards the developments in the Arab world, particularly the Tunisian revolution, is not unlike what Iran has been trying to build for years: a paradigm of Iranian monopolism in relation to its Muslim neighbours and the world at large.
- The Iranian narratives have dealt with the Arab revolutions as an influential event in the transformation of the region's future in which Iran must have a role.
- Iran met the revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen with enthusiasm (but that did not last long, and offset apprehensions after the NATO intervention in Libya. It continued to support Bahrain's status as a "rightful revolution that will win with God's support".
- Iran condemned the Syrian revolution from its outset.

- In its characterisation of the situation in Syria, the Iranian narrative used terms similar to those used to describe the protests in Iran after the 2009 Iranian presidential elections i.e. "sedition", "collaboration with enemies" and "external plotting".
- The issue of Mahdism is central to the Iranian justifications for the military intervention in the Arab world, particularly Syria. The situation in the Middle East "is not suitable for Imam al-Zaman's emergence, so these developments had to occur. Because the Middle East is the centre from which Imam al-Zaman will emerge, the biggest work rests with the Supreme Leader and the Iranian people. The Revolutionary Guard is a tool for preparing the earth for [the Imam's] emergence."

The "holy position" of the Guard, in the context of its presence in Syria, has become the Guard of the "Awaited Imam".

- With this new position and ideological reframing, the parameters of the Guard's work and presence have expanded, and its growing influence and involvement in Shiite and non-Shiite spheres outside Iran have been legitimised, according to the emergence narratives. Thus, Mecca (as the supposed place of the Imam's emergence), Yemen and the Levant are all areas for the Guard's work, as outlined after the Syrian revolution.
- Within this new "job description", offence in the Revolutionary Guard's work has been promoted, as this framework gives the Guard the right to work in Sunni areas, a step that initiated an unprecedented Sunni-Shiite conflict in the region.
- The Iranian narrative about Syria has clearly been minimalised and abstracted. This abstraction excludes the dead victims of Russian bombardments, the Syrian regime's barrel bombs and shelling, the regime's prisoners, and displaced and starving children.
- The vacuum and chaos in the Arab world, the absence of an Arab plan and the setbacks that hit the Arab revolutions facilitate the expansion of Iran beyond its borders. The "counter-revolutions" and their supporting policies provide a substantial margin for it to move and promote its narratives, the most prominent of which being "the fight against terrorism".
- Iran may have won the battle of narratives at several levels, particularly inside Iran. But it has also lost significantly in terms of soft power with failings in the moral values, which is clearly manifested by its image in the Arab world.
- Even as Iran continues to talk about its revolutionary heritage, the Syrian situation indicates that Iran lost its status as a supporter of the disadvantaged. In addition, the sectarian conflict has hit the region with Iran as an active player. Meanwhile, Iran's physical existence in the Arab world has become an imposed

presence, resulting from an existing vacuum in the Arab world; but this has been offset by a decline in Iran's soft power and a tarnished image in Arab minds.

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