

The Revolts in Iran: Fear of Iranian Soft Power in the Region?

Bernard Hourcade

Emeritus research director at the CNRS
Centre de Recherche sur le Monde Iranien
CeRMI, Paris.

For a long time, Iran had few relations with neighbouring states before the Islamic Revolution of 1979 upset the regional order and the fear of the Iranian revolution's export, which was Islamic, popular and anti-American, became the basis of relations between Iran and the countries in the region. Conversely, the many political, religious and cultural debates that have regularly affected Iran since 1979 have found little echo in neighbouring countries. The historical border between the Sunni Arab monarchies and the Shiite Persian republic seemed immutable and robust. On first analysis, it therefore seems logical that the 2022 revolts of Iranian women and youth against the Islamic veil, against the Islamic regime and for freedom provoked little reaction in the region.

This silence, often imposed by governments, can perhaps be explained less by the traditional cultural barrier between the Arab and Iranian worlds than by the Arab countries' fear of contagion, their fear of the peaceful, non-governmental, and therefore uncontrollable spread of the cultural and social as well as political demands of an 85-million-person-strong Iranian society. The case of the "Arab" Springs of 2011, which swept through the Arab world from Tunisia, was in everyone's memory. The fear of an Iranian soft power, more durable than the political regimes, came on top of the new geopolitical uncertainties linked to failures and the American withdrawal from the region, China's proactive policy and an Iranian nuclear programme outside of control.

Political Isolation Heightens Cultural Barriers

The silence of Iran's neighbours can be primarily explained by the weight of several decades of political hostility between countries. Iran has never abandoned its geopolitical heritage as an Islamicized but non-Arabicized nation, never colonized but encircled and threatened by its neighbours, as it was in the 19th century between the Ottoman, Russian and British empires. The rupture caused by the overthrow of the Iranian monarchy in 1979 was therefore all the stronger because the new republic, hostile to the United States and Israel, displayed its ambition to break out of this historical isolation and bring the Islamic revolution to the entire Muslim world.

The reaction of the neighbouring countries quickly materialized in the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988) and that of the United States in economic sanctions. The new Iranian Islamic regime responded with terrorist and destabilizing operations against European and Middle Eastern countries that supported Iraq, and later with the development of a long-clandestine nuclear programme sanctioned by the UN in the early 2000s. This regional and international isolation of Iran was never compensated by its alliances with Syria, the Lebanese Hezbollah and a handful of "Third World" countries. The political and above all military support of the United States and its allies to Iran's Arab neighbours thus sealed an old border reinforced by the exceptional economic success of the oil monarchies, while the Iranian experiment in political Islam seemed to have reached a lasting impasse (Roy, 1992).

In this context of contained hostility, social relations and travel were limited, especially for the pilgrimage to Mecca, and the media on both sides – under government control – kept highlighting problems without analysing them, and exchanging invectives. Hence,

the 2022 riots in Iran initially fell within this system of mutual disregard.

The Emergence of a Globalized Iranian Society

The paradox of the Islamic Republic of Iran's forty-year history lies in the contradiction between the stalemate of political institutions and the spectacular evolution of Iranian society (Hourcade, 2021). Indeed, Iranian society has undergone profound and uninterrupted transformations, despite domestic political conditions and international isolation. Beginning in the 1960s with the "White Revolution" launched by Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi (land reform, women's right to vote, creation of universities, etc.), this social revolution accelerated as of the 1980s, especially for the female population, perhaps in reaction to the deadlocked political situation (Kian, 2019).

Between 1976 and 2016, the urban population rate rose from 47% to 75%, the female literacy rate in rural areas from 17.3% to 72.8%, and the average number of children per woman dropped from 6.7 to 1.3. With 4.3 million students, i.e., 7.4% of the total population (France 4.4%), Iran has a massively educated population, often of high level in scientific fields. Despite this, Iran has not participated in the globalization that at the same time has shaken up the neighbouring Arab oil monarchies. Dubai has in fact become the "capital" of the region, while Tehran is stagnating with 15 million inhabitants but no international relations.

Popular riots are commonplace in Iran, but the women's and youth revolt of 2022 was completely unprecedented and unpredictable

To break this impasse, the government of Hassan Rohani, elected in 2013, changed its policy and accepted Barak Obama's outstretched hand, signing an agreement in 2015 with the five members of the UN Security Council plus Germany, under the aegis of the European Union, namely the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on the control of the

nuclear programme and the progressive lifting of the multiple economic sanctions that weighed heavily on the population. For the new Iranian middle class that grew up under the Islamic Republic, it was finally an opportunity to find work in the foreign companies that were flocking to Iran. The balance of power in the region was shifting. Iran was reborn and became a partner, a regional power to be reckoned with. The balance of tension with neighbouring countries was about to be broken.

The Fear of Iran as a Regional Power

For different reasons, Saudi Arabia, Israel and candidate Donald Trump immediately opposed Iran's return. Arabia was less concerned about the nuclear or military risk than the prospect of having to face the presence, influence and activism of an ambitious and competent Iranian society in all sectors of activity: economic, scientific, cultural, social and therefore also political. Iran's normalization was seen as a political danger, and the memory of the popular riots in Bahrain in 2011, perceived in Riyadh as instigated by Iran, was on everyone's mind (Friedman, 2012). On 8 May 2018, one of President Trump's first decisions was to revoke the JCPOA and impose even stronger economic sanctions on Iran.

Since then, Iran has been experiencing the most severe economic crisis the country has ever known. In March 2023, a dollar was worth 500,000 rials, as compared to 10,000 rials in 2010. The middle class, which had only just begun to feel the hope of better days, is ruined and desperate. The only response of the Tehran government was to entrench itself in a policy of nationalist confinement, by advocating economic "resistance," relaunching the nuclear programme and increasing confrontations with Arabia. The risk of a destabilizing influence on Iranian society was averted, but that of an armed conflict resurfaced.

The bombing of several Aramco refineries on 18 September 2019 and the refusal of the United States to help Riyadh in a conflict with Iran were the first concrete results of the American withdrawal from the Middle East, which required the construction of a new regional security system. Iran and Arabia, the two former "Gulf gendarmes" of the 1970s, which had broken off diplomatic relations in 2011,

then began secret negotiations with the assistance of Iraq and Oman.

Repression in Iran, Silence in the Region

In 2021, the election of Ebrahim Raisi as President of the Republic confirmed the concentration of all powers in the hands of conservative forces and the rupture with a society that massively abstained from the election and ended up revolting (Hourcade, 2023). Popular riots are commonplace in Iran, but the women's and youth revolt of 2022 was completely unprecedented and unpredictable. The hypothesis that multiple grievances and demands were expressed simultaneously was taken seriously. Without validating the thesis of an imminent revolution (Bayat, 2023), it is clear that, beyond the cultural demands about the veil, the demonstrators were demanding a change of political regime. A "clear out" movement that was reminiscent of the Arab Spring and has therefore worried the powers that be on both sides of the Persian Gulf.

For the oil monarchies, the overthrow of the Islamic Republic, welcome in the immediate term, could paradoxically strengthen Iran as a regional power

As in the past, the Islamic regime's first response was repression, which has claimed about five hundred victims (Khosrokhavar, 2023), while fears, divisions and paralysis of power were displayed. For the oil monarchies, the overthrow of the Islamic Republic, welcome in the immediate term, could paradoxically strengthen Iran as a regional power. It could mean a return to the situation in 2015, with Iran combining its fervent nationalism, its military power and the strength of a popular movement demanding human rights and political freedom.

Unlike the international media and the Iranian diaspora, which saw these revolts as the beginnings of an inevitable revolution, the first response of the Arab states was caution, and media discretion, apart

from the usual ironic criticism of their neighbour's problems. The same was true of Arab societies, except in a very modest way in Iraq and among "progressive" activists in the Emirates. Qatar did not want to disrupt its good relations with Iran. In Saudi Arabia, the only country in the region with a large national population involved in the reforms undertaken within the framework of the "Vision 2030" programme promoted by the Crown Prince Mohammad Ben Salman, the risk of a contagion of the Iranian "model" was not excluded. Iranian opposition media abroad were therefore financially supported, as usual, while some analysts considered the hypothesis of an Iranian military aggression to export the crisis and divert attention (Al Sulami, 2022).

China and the Normalization of Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations

By the beginning of 2023, the storm had passed, but the fundamental issues remained to be resolved. The revolt of women and young people did not spread to the whole of society or to small towns and suburbs, but the dynamic of protest remained alive and without a lasting solution to save the Islamic regime and the economic gains of the elites who have been in power for over forty years. The political impasse was all the more serious as these riots came on top of the inextricable international crises over the nuclear programme, American economic sanctions, interventions in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, the war in Ukraine and relations with Russia, and finally, relations with China, its main economic partner.

One solution would be to sign a new nuclear agreement, which was imminent in August 2022, but this would have generated an economic opening towards Europe and the United States as in 2015, which would have energized the middle classes and eventually provoked larger-scale riots. Instead of this prospect of opening up to the West, the conservative government preferred China's proposals and the normalization of relations with Saudi Arabia.

In Saudi Arabia, the possible or forthcoming emergence of an open and secularized Iranian society, of Iranian soft power, confirmed the fears that had justified opposition to the JCPOA in 2015. However, the prolongation of the endless and sterile

conflict with Iran was no longer an option since the confirmation of American withdrawal from the region. A change of strategy was necessary. Of course, the Iranian women's revolt alone does not explain the emergence, in Tehran as in Riyadh, of a Realpolitik and the signing in Beijing on 10 March 2022 of an agreement restoring relations between the two countries, but it does reflect the growing role of societies in political life, as was the case with the Arab Springs.

For the societies of Iran and the Arab world this *pax petroleasinica* could block or slow down their hopes for openness and consolidate the despotic regimes in place

Pax Petroleasinica

The peaceful coexistence between the two regional powers is unanimously welcomed because it enables the end of several conflicts that have been ravaging the region. For China, the largest trading partner of the two states, it was a necessary condition to guarantee the security of oil and gas exports and an opportunity to occupy the political and geographical spaces left vacant by the United States. For the societies of Iran and the Arab world, on the other hand, this *pax petroleasinica* could block or slow down their hopes for openness and consolidate the despotic regimes in place, which will not

be disturbed by their new partner with regard to freedom and human rights.

It could be different if a new agreement on the nuclear issue and the lifting of American sanctions were signed, opening Iran up to European companies and to an economic, social and ultimately political liberalization that would fulfil the ideals of freedom so strongly demanded by women, young people and the majority of the Iranian population and widely shared in the Arab world.

References

- AL SULAMI, Mohammed. "Iran seeks external enemy to distract from domestic failures." *Arab News*, 7 November 2022. <https://arab.news/569fm>.
- BAYAT, Asef. "Is Iran on the Verge of Another Revolution?" *Journal of Democracy*, 34-2, 2023, pp. 19-31.
- FRIEDMAN, Brandon. "Battle for Bahrain: What one uprising meant for the Gulf states and Iran." *World Affairs*, 174-6, 2012, pp. 74-84.
- HOURCADE, Bernard. *Iran, paradoxes d'une nation*. Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2021.
- HOURCADE, Bernard. "Ebrahim Raisi's Domestic Policy: Conservative, Pragmatic or Paralyzed?" *The Muslim World*, 113, 1-2, 2023, p. 19-31.
- KHOSROKHAVAR, Farhad. *Iran : La jeunesse démocratique contre l'État prédateur*. Éditions Fauves, 2023.
- KIAN, Azadeh. *Femmes et pouvoir en islam*. Paris: Michalon, 2019.
- ROY, Olivier. *L'échec de l'islam politique*. Paris: Seuil, 1992.