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## Watching in Silence

Arab Views on the Developments in Iran

By **Sami Moubayed**

*The Iranian elections have raised a stir in the Arab media and vibrated strongly in Arab capitals. Media outlets close to the positions of Syria, Hizbullah, and Qatar show a clear bias towards the Iranian official line, while outlets close to the camp that fears Iran, especially in the Arab Gulf, anticipate a breakdown of the Iranian government, similarly to the revolution of 1979. Sami Moubayed however doubts that that the current events will lead to radical changes and suggests that while Iran's Arab allies will stay put, waiting for it to settle its internal affairs, Iran's adversaries will eventually face disappointment.*



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The Iranian elections have raised more than a stir in the Arab media, and vibrated strongly in Arab capitals.

Spearheaded by the Saudi channel Al-Arabiyya, there are several outlets anticipating a complete breakdown in Iran, with extensive coverage of the disturbances since election results showed that President Mahmud Ahmadinejad has won another term-in-office. A more conservative approach is being taken by media outlets that are close to Syria, Hizbullah, and Qatar. Al-Jazeera, for example, is covering the elections at a clear arms length from both Ahmadinejad and his defeated contender, Mir-Hussein Mousawi. Hizbullah's Al-Manar TV is displaying clear bias towards Iranian officialdom, strongly in favor of the Grand Ayatollah, Ali Khamenei.

Syria's state-run press also originally covered the events at arms length, but then welcomed Ahmadinejad's victory as final and has avoided all the demonstrations and counter-demonstrations that have gripped Iran since mid-June. That was not the case with independent dailies, which covered the developing story with reports, all taken from the wires, with very little personal input. President Bashar Al-Asad was one of the first world leaders to congratulate the Iranian President, sending him a letter that promised continued cooperation between two countries that are "both pursuing a just and comprehensive peace in the region and in the world at large."

Abdulsalam Haykal, a Syrian technologist and media guru who publishes a host of Arabic and English magazines, noted: "As world governments strive to penalize the Iranians and corner them in a tight spot, as wrongdoers, they fail to remember that Iran, unlike the rest of the Middle East, boasts of some of the most advanced institutions in education, science, and research." Haykal, who is also a member of the board of trustees at the prestigious American University of Beirut added, "Leading universities around the world acknowledge that Iranian engineers and scientists are among the brightest and most prolific internationally. Even when we have our disagreements with Iran, we should keep in mind that they are a nation that has provided prosperity

to its citizens, and a maturing democratic model of governance." "The protests, unusual in that part of the world, attest to that, and to how technology-savvy the Iranian youth are," Haykal said.

Qatari Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani also came out defending Iranian democracy and saying that despite its setbacks, it was healthier than any system in the Arab world. He mistakenly said that since the Islamic Revolution took place in 1979, Iran had witnessed rotation of four presidents—more than all Arab countries. The actual number, however, was six not four, starting with Abolhasan Banisadr, ending with Ahmadinejad. His Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad Bin Jassem Al-Thani spoke shortly afterwards to Al-Jazeera noting, "We have to consider this as an internal affair because each country and its domestic affairs should be respected."

Both camps, those rooting for Mousawi and those rallying behind Ahmadinejad, are worried at what the future holds for Iran. Many in the Gulf, who have feared Iran for years, are bracing themselves for a complete breakdown, trying to draw parallels between what is happening today, and what happened in Iran back in 1979.

The only similarity however is demonstrators on the streets, and preachers at mosques raising the queue, a call to prayer, "Allahu Akbar." Advocates of this theory are about to face a big disappointment when these demonstrations start to gradually fade, within the weeks ahead, precisely because of lack of united and clear leadership. Additionally, there are fundamental differences in objectives, background, and leadership between 1979 and 2009.

Back then, the Iranians had the strong and charismatic leadership of the France-based Ruhollah Khomeini. He had a clear sense of purpose, bringing down the Shah's Peacock Throne. Ask ordinary Iranians on the streets today, and you won't find that same uniform answer. Actually, nobody would say that they are out to bring down the Revolution. Some are saying they want to purify the Revolution. Others are saying they want to bring down Ahmadinejad - without actually saying that they want to replace

him by Mousawi, who was never a great democrat when serving as prime minister, back in the 1980s. Mousawi, who is wrongly being called an “opposition leader” in the Western press, is actually a product of the Revolution, but doesn’t come close to matching Khomeini’s charisma in 1979.

But what really matters in comparing 1979 to today is the fact that the Shah only fell when Iranian soldiers decided to stop firing at the demonstrators. Any regime, no matter how strong, collapses when its soldiers decide to refuse obeying orders, siding with the people against officialdom. By all accounts, that is not the case in Iran today and there are no indicators whatsoever that the Iranian Army is about to rebel against President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, or Grand Ayatollah Khamenei.

Arab supporters of Ahmadinejad are worried, believing that “Western hands” have interfered in the Iranian scene, in clear yet silent reference, to the United States. Several creative theories are the air, put forth by analysts, journalists, and political commentators. One is that the US fueled the entire ordeal, to divert Iran’s attention from the withdrawal of American troops from Iraqi cities and towns, which becomes complete by June 30, 2009. They believe that Iran would have supported guerilla attacks on withdrawing US troops, taking revenge from Barack Obama for a mess left behind by George W. Bush.

What is true however is that Iran indeed has been distracted from events that usually mean a lot to decision-makers in Tehran. High on the list is the situation in Iraq and the post-election mood in Lebanon. Iran’s allies, the Hizbullah-led opposition, did not win a majority of the Lebanese Parliament, as many had expected, and managed to secure only 58 out of 128 seats in Parliament. Although Iran’s ally Nabih Berri has been re-elected speaker of the Lebanese Parliament, Tehran would certainly not welcome the recent appointment of Saad Harriri, one of its loud opponents, as Prime Minister.

But the fact of the matter is that the Iranian authorities are too busy today, to mind any of the

above. Their priority is to get domestic house into order, and Iran’s allies are being completely silent, waiting for it to settle its internal affairs, before seeking its help, on regional ones.