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The Arab Spring: Ideals of the Iranian Green Movement, Methods of the Iranian Revolution

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Which Iranian uprising does the Arab Spring bring to mind? The Green Movement of 2009, which challenged the pillars of the Islamic Republic of Iran, or the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which brought the Islamic Republic to power?

As protests swept Tunisia and other Arab countries, prominent Iranians claimed both of the Iranian precedents as inspiration for the Arab uprisings. Mir Hossein Musavi, the Green Movement's leading presidential candidate, suggested that

The starting point of what we are now witnessing on the streets of Tunis, Sanaa, Cairo, Alexandria and Suez can be undoubtedly traced back to days of 15th, 18th and 20th June 2009 when people took to the streets of Tehran in millions shouting "Where is my vote?" and peacefully demanded to get back their denied rights.¹

'Ali Khamene'i, self-styled "Supreme Leader" (*rahbar-i mu'azam*) of the Islamic Republic (his actual constitutional title is just *rahbar*, or leader), begged to differ:

Today's events in North of Africa, Egypt, Tunisia and certain other countries, have another sense for the Iranian nation. They have special meaning for the Iranian nation. This is the same as "Islamic Awakening," which is the result of the victory of the big revolution of the Iranian nation.²

The response from Arab activists to these Iranian claims of influence was: neither. During the first two weeks of Twitter postings with hashtag #Jan25—the main keyword for the Egyptian uprising that began on 25 January 2011—only 69 out of 42,466 tweets referred to Iran, and only 3 of these were in Arabic. Most were postings by Iranians or links to Western news reports, and none gave credit to Iranian precedent.³

Still, it was clear that the activists' sympathies lay more with the Green Movement than with the Islamic Revolution. A survey in Alexandria and Cairo during the week before President Husni Mubarak was ousted found only 18 percent of respondents approving of the Iranian regime, with 47 percent opposing it. (Thirty-six percent of respondents offered no opinion, perhaps a sign of Egypt's lack of interest in Iran.⁴) "No to the Mubarak god, no to the Saudi god, no to the Iranian god," insisted one #Jan25 tweet in Arabic.⁵ Another #Jan25 tweet, written in English by a self-identified Egyptian, denounced Iran's involvement in Arab affairs as "a foreign hand" like that of the Americans and Europeans.⁶ Wael Ghonim, the Egyptian Google employee and activist who became the international face of the uprising, wore an emerald green wristband during rallies and interviews—an apparent nod to the signature color of Musavi's presidential campaign and the subsequent protests in Iran. Ghonim told Iranian activists that the color "was just a coincidence, but I'm happy you guys made the connection!"⁷

Arab activists rejected Khamene'i's claim that the Arab Spring echoed Iran's Islamic Revolution. A speaker in Cairo's Tahrir Square responded to Khamene'i, to great applause: "Egypt will not be another Iran. We will not be governed by a religious

dictatorship, as in Iran.” The crowd then chanted anti-Iranian slogans.⁸ A statement by Egyptian activists denounced Khamene’i for trying to “drive a wedge in the nation’s fabric by talking about an Islamic revolution in an attempt to eliminate our Coptic brothers from our revolution.”⁹

The Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt’s largest Islamist organization, chimed in. Kamal El-Helbawy, a Brotherhood leader in London, thanked Khamene’i for his support, then said that “conditions of Egypt are completely different from Iran.” The Egyptian revolution “is not an Islamic revolution,” he stressed, and the Brotherhood will respect whatever form of government the Egyptian people choose in future elections.¹⁰ At a press conference in Cairo, spokesman Mohamed Morsy went further, rejecting Iranian influence entirely. The Muslim Brotherhood was “not responsible for statements from Iran or Lebanon or elsewhere, and does not want any of them to interfere in Egypt’s internal affairs.” The Brotherhood opposes a “religious state,” he continued, “because Islam is against it,”¹¹ reaffirming the prodemocracy position that the Muslim Brotherhood has taken in recent years.¹²

If the Iranian Green Movement was not the sole or main inspiration for the Arab Spring, as Musavi suggested, it was one of many inspirations, including the whole series of “color revolutions” of the past decade. Sayid Yossif, an Egyptian activist, included the Green Movement in his list of precedents:

[We learned] how to become a revolution in name, like the Salt March (India), the July 26 Movement (Cuba), Solidarity (Poland), the Movement of Lawyers and Judges (Pakistan), and the Green Movement (Iran), and how to make a revolution really alive and active like the Orange Revolution (Ukraine), the Cedar Revolution (Lebanon), and the Lily Revolution (Kyrgyzstan).¹³

“We have learned from you guys,” Ghonim told Iranian activists, “that at the end of the day with the power of people, we can do whatever we want to do.”¹⁴ Among the lessons of the Green Movement, it appears, was the tactic of cellphone photography and videography, uploaded to the Internet or forwarded to friends to bypass government censorship. Virtually every image of the Iranian Green Movement included, somewhere in the frame, a picture of someone taking a picture. So, too, in Cairo’s Tahrir Square and many other protests of the Arab Spring.

But in some ways, the successful uprisings of the Arab Spring replicated the Iranian Revolution of 1979 more closely than the Green Movement of 2009. They succeeded in overthrowing authoritarian regimes, as the Green Movement did not, and they did so through general strikes, which the Green Movement never managed to spark. During the Iranian Revolution, the general strike was so widespread that the government did not have enough troops to force everybody back to work, and workers in the oil industry shut down the monarchy’s primary source of income.¹⁵ In Tunisia, strikes began along with demonstrations in mid-December 2010. In Sidi Bouzid, where the uprising began, the regional labor federation announced a general strike for 12 January 2011, pushing the national labor federation—long considered “broken in” by the state¹⁶—to adopt an increasingly confrontational stance, shifting in two weeks’ time from calls for “serene dialogue” (30 December) to “political reforms” (4 January) to “involvement in the contentious movements of popular protest” (11 January).¹⁷ The authoritarian president of Tunisia fled on 14 January.

In Egypt, wildcat strikes were so widespread that they threatened the country's food supply. Egypt gets half of its grain from abroad,¹⁸ via ports that were shut down entirely for several days in late January and early February and then operated at partial capacity for a week until Mubarak resigned.¹⁹ Fuel shortages and curfews disrupted trucking, and the government shutdown of banks and Internet connections further complicated markets. One well-informed observer told me there was a real risk that Cairo might run out of food in a matter of weeks if such conditions continued.

The Iranian Green Movement observed these developments jealously. Musavi and others began to discuss a general strike within two weeks of the disputed presidential election of June 2009,²⁰ but never actually announced one, and widespread labor action never materialized. In early 2011, when the Green Movement once again took to the streets, inspired by the Arab Spring, strikes were again sporadic, and they focused on economic rather than political grievances.²¹ Some Iranian activists attributed the differing trajectories to greater repression in Iran: "When I compare the situation in Egypt with Iran, [the] Mubarak regime & military are angels," one Iranian wrote. "People in Egypt get arrested and released the same day while Iran[ian] Election protesters [are] still in prison after 2 yrs."²² Some Egyptians rejected this analysis: "In comparison, the death toll in Iran election protests was 30–80. There's probably that many dead in Alexandria or Suez alone."²³ This debate will no doubt continue in academic circles for some time to come.

NOTES

¹Mir Hossein Musavi, 29 January 2011, facebook.com/mousavi.

²Ali Khamene'i, 4 February 2011, leader.ir.

³Many thanks to Zeynep Tufekci and Deen Freelon for their assistance with the Twitter dataset.

⁴Pechter Middle East Polls, "Phone Survey of Cairo and Alexandria," 5–10 February 2011, pechter-polls.com.

⁵Bad_Way, Twitter, 24 January 2011.

⁶GhadahG, Twitter, 25 January 2011.

⁷"Egyptian Activist's Message to Iranians: Learn From Egyptians, and We Learned From You," www.iranhumanrights, 10 February 2011.

⁸*Al-Ahram*, 6 February 2011, ahram.org.eg.

⁹*Al-Masry al-Youm*, 10 February 2011, almasryalyoum.com.

¹⁰Kamal El-Helbawy, BBC Persian Service, 6 February 2011.

¹¹*Al-Shuruq*, 10 February 2011, shorouknews.com.

¹²Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, "The Muslim Brotherhood after Mubarak," *Foreign Affairs*, 3 February 2011; Asef Bayat, "Egypt and the Post-Islamist Middle East," 8 February 2011, opendemocracy.net.

¹³Sayyid Yusuf [Sayed Yossif], "Man Sana'a al-Thawra al-Misriyya," 31 May 2011, al-tahrer.com.

¹⁴"Egyptian Activist's Message to Iranians."

¹⁵Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 111–14.

¹⁶Béatrice Hibou, *The Force of Obedience: The Political Economy of Repression in Tunisia* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 123–28.

¹⁷*Ifriqiyah*, 31 December 2010, ifriqiyah.com; *Turess*, 11 January 2011, Turess.com; "al-Ittihad al-'Amm al-Tunsi li-l-Shughl," 28 December 2010, 4 and 11 January 2011, ugtt.org.tn

¹⁸Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Global Information and Early Warning System on Food and Agriculture (GIEWS), 13 September 2011, fao.org/giews.

¹⁹Port Technology International, 1 February 2011, porttechnology.org; Reuters, 7 February 2011; Maersk Line, 11 February 2011, maerskline.com.

²⁰Mir-Hosseini Musavi, 21 June 2009, facebook.com.

²¹Kevan Harris, "Iran: Why Workers Aren't Joining the Protests," *Time*, 22 February 2011, time.com. I thank Ali Kadivar as well for his insights on this point.

²²CyrusShares, Twitter, 7 February 2011.

²³Tomgara, Twitter, 29 January 2011.