Iran's Role Dilemma in the Arab Region after the Arab Revolutions

Eman Ragab

Keywords: Iran, Arab spring, regional power

Abstract:

This paper is concerned with Iran's role in the region after the Arab spring. It argues that Iran since the occupation of Iraq, is suffering from a role dilemma created by a gap between its role practices and the level of regional acceptance of those practices, in particular by U.S and Arab countries. Iran is seeking regional and international recognition of its role in the region, sometimes as a “super regional power,” a “regional pioneering” role, a "revolutionary strong state," a "security guardian of the Gulf," or most recently as a "core state in the New Free Islamic Middle East." Arab countries and the U.S don't recognize this role due to the consequences of that step for their own interests.

This paper argues that the Arab spring put more pressure on this conventional role dilemma as it poses more constrains that may widen the gap between Iran’s practices and the level of legitimacy it can gain. It also creates another dilemma regarding the role type to be played by Iran in the region. In other words, after the Arab revolutions, Iran's problem lies in the practices of the role itself and not only in the role’s legitimacy.
Introduction

The Arab region is witnessing a strategic transformation led by the wave of revolutions that is brewing in it. One aspect of this transformation is the redefinition of the matrix of roles in the region. For the first time since its establishment, the GCC began to play a more active role in securing the stability of the gulf region through deploying al-Jazeera shield forces in Bahrain, mediating between the opposition in Yemen and Ali Saleh, and interfering in Syria to secure a power transition. These initiatives cannot be isolated from the Saudi ambition to balance the Iranian influence in the Gulf.

The ousting of Hosni Mubarak, and the success of the Muslim Brotherhood(MB) candidate Mohamed Morsi in the presidential elections, proved the strategic importance of Egypt in the region. Egypt acted as the trigger of change, and it developed a model of political change that began to spread in the Arab countries. The Post- MB Egypt is expected to play a genuine regional role that would turn Egypt into a balancer or a challenger to the traditional main players in the region.

These transformations posed more pressures on Iran's role in the Arab region, the country that used to be the most influential regional player since the occupation of Iraq in 2003. This paper argues that Iran after the Arab "spring" is suffering from a role dilemma that has two dimensions. First, is the conventional dilemma created by the occupation of Iraq, and intensified by the Arab revolutions. The Arab spring poses more constrains that may widen the gap between Iran practices and the level of legitimacy it can gain. The second dimension is regarding the role type to be played by Iran in the region. The problem is in the role it practices itself and not only in the role legitimacy.

The first section of this paper examines these two dimensions of Iran’s role dilemma. The second section argues that Iran's role dilemma will continue to exist, albeit on a lower scale. This scenario presumes that Iran will curb its support to its proxies and allies in the region and will confine its activity to the Levant: Iraq and the Lebanon. The scope of this paper is the Arab region and not the Middle East, reference to Turkey and Israel will be used as it serves the goal of this paper.
Dimensions of Iran's role dilemma

Following the official discourse of the Iranian top leaders, like the Supreme leader, and the President, it is noticeable that there is no consensus on the role type to be played by Iran in the Arab region. Sometimes the role is described as a “super regional power,” a “regional pioneering” role, a "revolutionary strong state" (Holsti, 1970, p. 238), a "security guardian of the Gulf" (Sciolino, 2000), and most recently a "core state in the New Free Islamic Middle East." El-Sayed Mohamed Hasan Abu Turaby, vice president of the Islamic Shoura Council in Iran, considered Khamanei as the "architecture" of the new Islamic Middle East (Rohama, Feb. 2, 2011), and Khamanei in his Friday ceremony considered the revolution in Egypt and Tunisia and other Muslim countries as an "echo of the Iranian revolution" (Rohama, Feb. 5, 2011).

However, these role types in essence are securing a role for Iran as the state that can lead the region in its interactions and development. Such conviction is equally unwavering among Iranian reformists and extremists. Since the Iranian revolution, Iran has tended to play a role that satisfies its expectation as a revolutionary strong state.

Its foreign policy since then till today tended with varying degrees to change the prevalent matrix of roles and distribution of power in the region through a revisionist approach. Although Iran does already carry out a number of practices that constitute each of those role types, its "role" as its foreign policy in the region suggests since the Iranian revolution, is going through a dilemma after the Arab revolutions. I argue that this dilemma has two dimensions. One is conventional and existed since the occupation of Iraq and deepened by the Arab Spring. The other is created by regional changes driven by the Arab Spring.

The conventional role dilemma is caused by lack of regional legitimacy. The practices of Iran's role has not gained the required legitimacy from GCC countries, Egypt and the U.S. According to foreign policy role theory, there are three variables that affect regional role of any state: role conception, status, and legitimacy. Legitimacy and acceptance of the role by other states as Charles Doran suggests is an essential component for any role to be played (Holsti, 1970, pp.238-240; Bonner, 1959, p.383; Aggestam, Feb. 15, 1999), and gaining it depends on the goal of the role, whether it
aims at changing the status quo, and the extent to which this constitutes a real or perceived threat to other states (Lahneman, pp. 98-99). Arab countries, especially GCC countries, Egypt and US considered Iran's practices illegitimate, and a threat to their own interests and roles in the region.

Iran's practices deepened the division of the Arab countries into two main pillars, the moderate and the radical. The former is represented by Egypt, GCC, Jordan, and recently Yemen, supported by U.S. The latter is represented by Iran and its allies and proxies. These pillars were not translated into institutions, but into summits and coordination of policies between parties. Arab countries used this strategy to balance and to contain the Iranian influence in some areas, namely Iraq, Palestine, Bahrain, and Yemen. The Iranians used it to exert more influence in the region, and to prove to the U.S that they are the player that controls security and stability in the region. As a result, the region has become divided along the Shiite – Sunni lines. This divide for some countries, like GCC countries, is more like a threat that has the potential to blow up their societies from inside.

Besides, Iran's policies increased the influence of the religious non-state actors in the region. Al-Mahdy Army and other Shiite militias become a crucial factor in achieving stability in Iraq, and the Houthis become one of the security concerns not only to Yemen but to Saudi Arabia and Oman. Those entities are hard to be dealt with, or to predict their behavior because they are not state actors.

The second dimension of Iran's role dilemma is its inability to practice its roles as it used to do before the Arab Spring. There are three main strategies that constituted Iran's role practices. First, maintaining its network of “Shiite” proxies and operatives in order to ensure its dominion over the Arab region, a strategy that emanates from its indirect aggressive policies practiced since the eruption of the Islamic Revolution in February 1979. It aimed at exporting the revolution to Sunni-dominated Gulf countries through remotely-controlled Shiite minorities in those countries. In 1981, this strategy led to the attempted coup in Bahrain by a number of pro-Iranian Shiites, to the violent clashes in Bahrain in the mid of 1990s, and to unrest in Bahrain since 2004 (Cordesman, Ragab, Sep.2011; see note no.1).

Iran exerts influence on Shiites in several ways: offering some of them financial support and arms (Shiites in Iraq and Lebanon), and providing others with financial
support (Houthis groups in Yemen) and media coverage of their activities and demands through its Arabic-speaking Al-Alam satellite channel (case of Bahrain). The existence of this network might not be important in itself, but in the way it can be used to serve the Iranian interest and to destabilize the countries where it operates.

The interference of al-Jazeera shield forces in Bahrain in March 2011, in order to secure the ruling family, and the limited political defeat of the Bahraini opposition led by al-Wefaq association, interms of not gaining any political concession from the ruling family after ayear and ahalf of sporadic demonstrations –put more constrains on the type of support Iran can provide to Shiites communities in the Gulf.

It is worth noting, that the Iranian network of proxies is not active only in internal issues, it has an independent position regarding developments in other countries. Usually this position follows the official position of Iran and causes embarrassment to their home governments. For instance, the uprising in Bahrain was part of this scheme, orchestrated by according to some Bahrain Officials and politicians those Shiites loyal to Iran led by Hasan Misheima’a, and EssaQassem, both adopting radical demands, and in part led by Feb.14 youth and other Shiite political groups supported by less radical Sunni politicians who called for reform of the current regime (Ragab, Apr. 2012). Hassan's followers were more active and were the party that controlled the streets. They managed to paralyze the country through expanding their marches and demonstrations beyond the Pearl roundabout. Their moves were supported by Hezbollah in Lebanon. Hassan Nasrallah supported what he called "peaceful uprising in Bahrain" and criticized the intervention of al-Jazeera shield forces (BBC Arabic, Mar. 19 2011). In response, the Bahraini government stopped all flights to Beirut, and asked the Lebanese government to take responsibility for the behavior of Hezbollah. Also, Al-Sadr in Iraq organized demonstrations condemning the Bahraini regime and asked Qatar to mediate between the Shiites and the regime (AlSabah News paper, May 10, 2005,).

Second, Iran is broadening its network of allies in the region beyond Syria. Iran propagated its image as “the protector of Palestinians” and “the supporter of Islamic resistance,” and being an enemy of Israel, “the Great Satan.” It established a coalition with Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command. This was stressed in a statement by Hojjat al-Islam Ali Khatami who said that Iran “has a natural right, if not a sacred national obligation, to protect the Palestinians facing Israel” (Brezezinski, Gates, and Meloney, Mar. 2004, p.34;
Along with this policy, Iran assigned the last Friday of the month of Ramadan to celebrate the Jerusalem Day (Brezezinski, Gates, and Meloney, Mar. 2004, p. 36).

The ongoing conflict in Syria put Iran's network under pressures, as replacing Assad with anti-Iran elite, would end its strategic alliance with Syria. Moreover, this conflict motivated Hamas to move its office from Syria to Egypt, and to look for a replacement of Iran as a source of finance. Besides, the Muslim Brotherhood that is ruling Egypt is more open to help Hamas and to open borders with Gaza, a policy that would reduce Hamas' reliance on Iran.

Moreover, the fall of Assad, would end the logistic and military support provided to Hezbollah through Syria, as it is till now supporting Assad in its policies toward the opposition. This situation created more pressures on Hezbollah to redefine its identity to be more a "Lebanese party" rather than an "Iranian proxy".

Third, the political projects proposed by Iran in order to gain legitimacy for its practices and roles already played through its proxies, allies, and Bonyads (Thaler, Nader, pp. 56-58, see Note no. 2), is not supported by main countries in the region.

According to the Role Theory, having a project accepted by other countries in the region is necessary for gaining legitimacy for playing any role.

Iran's scheme has always involved two main pillars: Rebuilding Iraq, and the Gulf security. It added to it after the Arab spring the creation of a "New Free Islamic Middle East."

Iran's role in Iraq was contested by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and to an extent by Egypt. It was viewed by Saudi Arabia as a threat to its influence in the Gulf. According to Dalia Dassa Kaye, and Fredric Wehrey's study, some Arab countries "went too far demonizing the Iranian role, either out of mis-assessing the limits of Iranian power, or as part of a fabricated augmentation of the Iranian Shiite peril that they faked to distract their peoples away from significant issues, i.e.: political reform, human rights, women rights, and development" (Kaye and Wehrey, July 2009, see note no. 3).

Historically, Iranian proposals for securing the Gulf were not accepted by GCC countries and by Iraq during Sadam era. Its 12 points project proposed during GCC summit in Doha 2007 (Iranian Presidency, 2007; Al-Vefagh, Dec. 3, 2007), wasn't welcomed by GCC. The Saudi Foreign Minister stated that the Iranian proposal was in the most part “related to economic cooperation,” and wishing that it approached
“the points of disagreement, because establishing economic relations requires removal of impediments” (Ragab, June 2010).

Regarding the creation of New Free Islamic Middle East, Iran's started to preach this idea during the Arab revolutions. This proposal proves the pragmatism of Iran that can adapt to any changes in the region, especially after the failure of the above mentioned proposals. It envisaged the revolutions in Egypt, and Libya as an echo to the Islamic revolution that took place in Iran in 1979, but not those in Syria and Bahrain, despite the non-Islamic nature of the revolution in the former.

The success of this new proposal as a source of legitimacy to Iranian role depends on the future of the revolutionary countries, and whether it will be transformed into "Islamic" countries that would enter into alliance with Iran. The speech of Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's president, in Tehran indicates that its relations with Iran will be based on religious differences. His speech defined Egypt as a "Sunni" state, which redefined Egypt's stances of the ongoing Sunni-Shiites conflict in the region. The probability of maintaining strong "alliance" or partnership with Iran that crosses doctrinal differences is not certain, with increasing political importance of Salafi groups in Egypt who are ideologically against Iran. Besides, the defeat of the pro-Iranian groups in Bahrain and possibility of changes in Syria would work against this proposal.

Iran's shrinking role?

After the Arab revolutions, the future of Iranian foreign policy role in the Arab region is to be reshaped by four variables: the Iraqi factor, Arab countries’ stances on Iran, U.S policies, and Iran's internal dynamics.

The weight of these determinant variables and the legitimacy it provides to Iran's role is changing. Before the Arab Spring, the Iraqi factor and the American policies could be argued to be the two most important factors in understanding Iran's policies. After the Arab Spring, the decision to grant legitimacy for Iran's role needs to be made regionally, with less of American influence. Iran has to seek legitimacy from Arab countries as they become the main players in the region. The GCC decided to work on its behalf, and in some cases without coordinating with U.S to confront the Iranian influence in Bahrain and Yemen. The role of the U.S has become more limited and less influential. In this situation, Iran should give the Arabs and in particular GCC real
concessions and abandon the network of proxies that is the most controversial part of its role practices for these countries.

I argue that the regional impact of the revolutionary change in the Arab countries, especially in Syria, would restrain Iran's regional role. This might not be linked to the stage of its negotiations with the United States in the framework of the 5+1 talks concerning its nuclear program, but more to the changes caused by the uprising and revolutions that are taking place in Arab countries.

This scenario presumes that Iran's role practices as known since the occupation of Iraq will change. Its network of allies will be narrowed, and if Assad is overthrown, Syria's alliance with Iran will be going through changes. This change will have its repercussion on its relation with Hamas and other resistance groups that began to adopt more pragmatic stances. Thus, turning the Levant into a hostile environment to Iranian influence, that is expected to be replaced by Saudi influence. This scenario presumes also that Iran's ability to provide support to its proxies will decrease, and it will rely on media and political support. The only strong relation it will maintain will be with its traditional proxies in Iraq and Lebanon.

This scenario is supported by changes in Arab countries’ stances of Iran's interference in their affairs, its preoccupation with mutual negotiations with the United States about its nuclear program, and by its internal problems that were revealed during the disturbances in the aftermath of Iranian presidential elections in June 2009. During these disturbances, supporters of reformists denounced the Iranian backing of resistance movements, which was clear in their banners that read “No to Gaza! No to Hamas! We Fall Martyrs for Iran.” Demonstrators also chanted slogans condemning dictatorship and the system of Islamic Jurists Guardianship that Iran spreads in the region( Al-Rai newspaper, Sep. 18, 2009).

Iran's internal dynamics are important in defining its role in the region in the foreseeable future, but not yet very effective, unless these dynamics will change the ruling elite in Iran. The economic sanctions imposed by the UN, the US, and the Europeans is not very effective, especially as Iran managed till now to maneuver around its impact, by activating its economic relations with Asian, African and Latin American countries.

In addition, the conflict in Syria, and the Iranian support of Assad's regime, increased the tension between GCC countries and Egypt in particular and Iran. However, the
Mecca summit held in Saudi Arabia in August 2012 to discuss the conflict in Syria reflected a Saudi and Egyptian openness to negotiating with Iran a solution to the situation. This openness was elaborated in Morsi’s initiative of the regional quartette (Ragab, Aug.26,2012). But Iran is did not fully accept the initiative and preferred it to be a forum to discuss all regional issues not only the Syrian issue.

This position hindered the proceedings of the quartette’s second meeting in Egypt held in Sep 2012. According to many Saudi commentators, Saudi Arabia didn't attend the meeting due to Iranian "lack of cooperation."

Besides, the Iranian proposal of the New Islamic Middle East is not popular among revolutionary groups in the region, due to number of reasons. First, the revolutions took place in Tunisia, Egypt, and the uprising in Libya was not Islamic in nature and did not resemble the Iranian revolution in its tactics or dynamics. Second, Iran is against the uprising in Syria, and there are allegations that it supported the regime to oppress the demonstrators. In addition, the crisis in Bahrain coincided with the demonstrations organized by the green movement in Iran. The way the Iranian regime condoned its oppression and at the same time it was criticizing the oppression of the Bahraini regime, delegitimize Iran’s call for a "free" Islamic Middle East.

Besides, the reaction of GCC toward Iranian intervention in Bahrain indicates that these countries, despite maintaining good economic and cultural relations with Iran, are ready to limit it in order to maintain their own stability. Their concern is no longer limited to regional security, but rather to regime security that can be threatened by Iran.

Also, the new structure of power in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya is dominated by the MB and in the first two cases by Salafi groups too who have religious positions toward Iran. For instance, Salafis are an important part of the ruling coalition in Egypt and are against activating relations with Iran. They were even against Morsi’s visit to Tehran in August 2012.

In addition, the American administration follows a “claw-trimming” policy, targeting Iran’s proxies and allies. The United States is supporting Yemeni efforts against the Houthis and al-Qaeda who are supported by Iran (Pipes, and Clawson , p.126.;Jones), and imposed sanctions on the Syrian regime and leaders in the Revolutionary Guard for oppressing the anti-regime demonstrators in Syria. US Treasury Department recently imposed financial sanctions on Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hezbollah, along
with Mustafa Badr Al-Din and Talal Hamiyah due to "aiding Assad’s violent campaign against the Syrian people and working to support a regime" (Atlas, Sep 13, 2012).

**Conclusion**

The regional strategic transformation triggered by the Arab Spring, deepened Iran's conventional role dilemma, as it widened the gap between its practices and the level of legitimacy it could gain. Also, it imposes constraints on Iran's ability to practice its role as it used to before the Arab Spring, and this created a new dimension of Iran's dilemma.

Iran encounters two obstacles for alleviating its role dilemma. First, the matrix of regional roles is determined regionally, with less influence from U.S. It has to play the roles game on regional bases, and should give the GCC countries, and Egypt real concessions and abandon the most controversial parts of its role practices. But, is Iran ready for that?

Second, the new ruling elite in Egypt is redefining Egypt's regional role as a challenger to that of Iran's, rather than being its ally. Despite Egypt's declaration of its intents to normalize relations with Iran after the January 25th revolution, Morsi during his visit to Riyadh in July 2012 emphasized that Egypt is the protector of the Sunni project (CNN Arabic, Aug 11, 2012). This raises the question of possibility of alliance between Egypt and Iran under the umbrella of Islam. Or will the regional Sunni-Shiite divide turn *Egypt more hostile to Iran*? The shape the region will take after the fall of Assad is unpredictable, and whether there will be a friendly environment toward Iran or a more hostile one remains to be seen. But in either cases regional changes will redefine Iran’s role in the region.

**Notes:**

1 Some Shiites in Bahrain consider Iraqi Shiite religious authorities and the Lebanese authority Hassan Nasrallah as their religious reference. Fadlallah disagreed with the Iranian authority Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in 1996 about Iran’s Shiite influence in Lebanon. Fadlallah is an important authority for Arab Shiites in the Gulf.

2-Bonyads had existed as traditional structures under the Shah, providing humanitarian aid to the poor and other populations in need, but they also served as slush funds for the elite and helped deliver patronage. They continued in a similar role under the Islamic Republic but also greatly expanded their
financial resources when they took control of assets confiscated after the revolution from wealthy Iranians and the Pahlavi Foundation.

3-This was proved in a study based on interviews carried out by Dalia Dassa Kaye, and Fredric Wehrey’s with several Egyptian, Saudi, Bahraini, and Jordanian officials over two complete years. They also analyzed articles, opinion columns, and editorials of a number of Arab newspapers discussed the Iranian policies in the Arab region and the American policies regarding Iran and the region.

Sources:

- Al-Rai newspaper, Sep. 18, 2009, Iranian opposition: Hussein.. Mir Hussein...
- Al-Vefagh Iranian newspaper, Dec.3,2007, Iran wishes progress, advancement, and prosperity to all the peoples of the region and establishment of peace and security without any foreign intervention.


- Howaidi, Fahmy, 2011, Iran from Inside, Dar al-Shorouq, Cairo.


- Ragab, Eman, Sep. 2011, Iran’s Role Dilemma in the Arab Region: Dimensions and Potential Scenarios, a paper submitted to GCC-Iran Relations workshop organized as part of GRM Annual conference hosted in Cambridge University, Sep 2011.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eman Ragab</td>
<td>About the Author</td>
<td>is researcher at Gulf Studies Unit &amp; Strategic and Security Studies Unit, Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies (ACPSS), Cairo-Egypt; an International Relations Ph.D. Candidate, Faculty of Economics and Political Science-Cairo University-Egypt, and editor of the &quot;Theoretical Trends Itigahat Nazariya&quot; a periodic supplement to International Politics Journal al-Siyas al-Dawliya.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>