

## **Arab and Iranian Revolts 1979–2011: Influences or Similar Causes?**

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In the thirty-two years from 1979 to 2011 there have been numerous mass movements in Iran and several Arab countries that have overthrown or threatened rulers who seemed secure for several decades. By September 2011, the shah of Iran and the presidents of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya had been overthrown; of those, only the anti-Qaddafi revolt had outside (NATO) help. Major popular movements had also threatened the rulers of Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria. Iran had seen the massive Green Movement in 2009, aimed primarily at fraud in that year's presidential elections. Among the questions that emerge regarding these movements are the following: Why did they arise when they did? Why were they not predicted? How much influence did one or more of these movements have on the others? Why were some movements successful and others, thus far, not? Some of these questions will demand long study and analysis, which may not lead to a consensus. Here will be a preliminary brief discussion of a few of them, with stress on the question of influence.

There is no scientific way to determine the influence of one movement on another. However, regarding the 2011 uprisings in the Arab world, which broke out within weeks of one another, and were in close contact, there is strong evidence of the influence of the early successful movements in Tunisia and Egypt on the more difficult ones in other Arab countries. It is also widely understood that a main reason why the Tunisian and Egyptian movements were successful so quickly and the others were not was that much of the military in Tunisia and Egypt joined, or did not block, the opposition, while this happened far less in Libya, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen. The role of outside military participation was crucial in Libya, on the side of the opposition, and in Bahrain, where the government had Saudi Arabian help.

A more difficult question concerns the possible influence of two Iranian movements—in 1978–79 and in 2009—on the Arab uprisings. To begin with relevant parallels from the global history of revolutions, revolutionary waves have spanned several, sometimes apparently unconnected, countries. Historians speak of a late 18th-century wave, in which the American, French, and Haitian revolutions were important. The early 19th-century wave of liberation movements in Latin America owed something to these earlier revolutions. The revolutions of 1848 in Europe influenced one another, as did their successful counterrevolutions. A less studied wave occurred in Asia in the early 20th century and included the Chinese revolution that deposed the Qing dynasty as well as the Young Turk and Iranian constitutional revolts; Ottoman movements and Iranian oppositionists living in Ottoman territory had influenced Iran. Both world wars were followed by Communist-led revolutionary movements and colonial liberation movements.

In the above waves some revolts influenced others, but some were independent. To speak of a wave, revolts should be close in time. While many authors cite a supposed wise quotation from Zhou Enlai (always without a source), saying that it was too early to judge the influence of the French Revolution, such delayed influence is so diffuse that it can hardly be a major cause of a much later revolution. History suggests that the

1979 Iranian Revolution came too early to be a strong influence on 2011 movements in the Arab world. The Green Movement of 2009 may be considered part of a 2009–11 revolutionary wave, but its influence on Arab movements cannot be assumed.

When the 1979 revolution occurred, many outside commentators expected that similar movements would soon succeed elsewhere in the Middle East. There were, however, major movements (soon suppressed) only among the Shi'a, who make up a majority or significant minority only in Iraq, Lebanon, and some small Persian Gulf states. The Shi'a–Sunni divide is today strong, making emulation of Shi'i movements by religious Sunnis very unlikely.

Besides the Shi'i–Sunni division, there was another feature of Twelver Shi'ism, as practiced in Iran and some other regions, which made revolutions among non-Shi'a on the Iranian model improbable. During the past few centuries the Shi'a developed a theory in which all believers had to follow the rulings of Shi'i leaders called mujtahids (more recently called ayatollahs). In some periods there was a single top leader, while in others there were two or more, each known as a grand ayatollah. Khomeini was only one of several grand ayatollahs, but he had a devoted and competent group of religiously trained and revolutionary followers. While the 1979 revolution mobilized many different political and religious groups, all of which included many women, the devoted Khomeinist group was the least crippled by persecution and emerged dominant in the postrevolution years.

Sunni countries had no demand that all believers follow the rulings of a religious leader, and Sunni religious leaders, unlike many Shi'i ones, were mostly complaisant to their governments. Hardly any country had a trained religious leader as revolutionary as Khomeini and his followers. Although several Sunni countries had long-lived Islamist organizations, usually tied to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, these were led by laymen, not by trained religious leaders. (Examples include Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb in Egypt, Rashid Ghannushi in Tunisia, and Abu A'ala Maududi in South Asia.) Such men had smaller mass followings than Khomeini did and lacked his key cadre of other trained religious leaders.

As important as the Shi'i–Sunni divide is the perceived ethnic divide between Persian speakers and Arabic speakers. Iranians and Arabs do not identify ethnically with one another, and many in each group feel superior and often hostile to the other. This is an obstacle to cross-ethnic influence.

The 1979 revolution thus had less immediate impact in the Arab world than many feared, and it is unlikely that any significant impact of the 1978–79 events was felt abroad in 2011. Closer in time was the Iranian Green Movement of 2009, but even here it is hard to prove much influence. The Green Movement was initially directed at electoral fraud and never spoke with one voice on restructuring the government, much less on overthrowing the existing rulers. After their 1979 experience, many Iranians, unlike most Arabs, are dubious that revolutions are useful—opposing postrevolution Iran is very different from opposing Arab rulers whose original rebellious or revolutionary origins were long forgotten. Nor were Arabs uniformly hostile to Ahmadinejad or to Iran's policies. Some Arabs admired the Iranian government for its independence of the United States and hostility to Israel.

If either Iranian revolt had an influence on the Arab Spring, it was largely in showing that masses of people of varying views could be mobilized even against a strong

autocratic government and in suggesting means of mobilization. There were some similarities among nearly all of these movements, including using the latest means of mass communication, involving a wide variety of ultimately incompatible groups, and focusing on overthrowing rulers rather than on a specific program. All except the 2009 Green Movement were directed against broadly secular rulers and included Islamist groups. The 2009–11 movements overwhelmingly repudiated terrorism. They asked for an extension of freedoms and for popular control of government. They all responded to economic difficulties, often including high unemployment, inflation, extreme income gaps, and little hope for a better future. Hostility to foreign policies seen as subservient to the United States and Israel was one, but not the main, component of the 1979 and 2011 movements. These points do not prove Iranian influence on Arab movements; most were similar responses to similar circumstances.

More broadly, the history of recent attempts to overthrow Arab governments seems to show that they are far more likely to lead to positive outcomes if the main impetus comes from inside rather than from a Western invader, as in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is too early to predict the outcome of any of the Arab movements, but one can say that raising the hope of ordinary people that they need not be subject to autocrats or outside powers but can themselves determine their destinies is a good portent, however complex the task of achieving a better future may be.