

# IRAQ AND THE ARAB SPRING

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## **I-Tentative Assumptions:**

I begin with two controversial assumptions:

**One:** Unlike what most Iraqi scholars believe, post 2003 change of regime in Iraq did not inspire the democratic upheaval known as “the Arab Spring”; in fact it delayed it. Iraq’s turmoil was used by despots across the Arab world as a showcase of how Western-imposed democracy is dripped in sectarian blood.

**Two:** Contrary to the widely accepted notion, the Arab Spring did not begin in Tunisia (December 2010) rather in Iran right after the June 2009, widely believed to have been doctored to ensure a second term of the Iranian president Ahmadinajad. Iran is rich with grass-root civil dissidence, one that toppled the Shah regime by civil action rather than military coup. Arab countries, by contrast, have been bereft of such civil potency, until the series of mass, urban action that erupted in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria.

If this assumption has some truth, the movement will boomerang to Iran in the foreseeable future. The success of the Spring Movements is yet to be completed. Syria is still in a stalemate; whereas Iran is seemingly stable.

## II-Political Differentials and Common

### Reference:

A meaningful analysis of the case, Iraq and the Arab Spring, should begin with a necessary differentiation of Arab polities:

1- The Sultanistic type (e.g. Saudi Arab), despotic polities embedded in religion and tradition; 2- the authoritarian-totalitarian type (Syria, Libya, etc), of centralized polities of party-state, total hegemonic structures; and, 3- the semi-reformed authoritarian group (Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, among others such as Jordan, Morocco), where a measure of political tolerance, and a measure of 'free-market' spaces, have established, allowing for niches of civil organization and action.

Protest movements erupted in the third, reformed group, and spread, even prematurely, to both Sultanistic and totalitarian /authoritarian polities. This differential has far reaching historical significance that can further be explored and debated.

The spill-over is, to a great extent, reminiscent of the chain reaction that engulfed

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Eastern Europe 'socialist regime', or Latin American military regimes, in the 1990s. Each region had a common framework, and common reference points.

Iraq has far surpassed other Arab countries in the deconstruction of the old totalitarian system, but it still retains hyper-centralized features, and has been moving towards more authoritarian mode of governance, a fact that invited cross ethno-communal challenges.

## III-Iraq's Dilemma:

Generally, Iraq is in limbo, an indeterminate state of things that tortures hopeful and fearful leading politicians. For them, the full impact of the Arab spring is yet to come, as the Syrian stalemate continues, and the Iranian protest is still dormant.

What the Arab civil protest movements have thus far achieved is to dismantle the Egyptian Model, a totalitarian/authoritarian military regime, with or without the single party (the old *al-Ittihad al-Ishtiraki*, or the new

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*Watani* party) that hegemonized the nation by a de facto single party-single family rule, which installed crony capitalism under Sadat-Mubarak that made a mockery of market-embedded liberal democracy.

Needless to say, this model prevailed since 1952 in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Sudan and Algeria. But now, the tyranny of high brass is over (Turkey achieved the same result via an electoral, democratic process.)

Now, according to our assumption, if the movement boomeranged to its presumable origin, Iran, this would, if successful, lead to the downfall of the second model that also spread in the region, the Khomeini type of clerical totalitarianism, an outcome that will bring down with it, or weaken, an array of socio-political and ideological offshoots in Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, and even Palestine (West bank and Gaza).

The analysis of the first leg (the Arab countries) is one of factual examination of existing reality, the analysis of the second leg, Iran, is hypothetical examination of what

is yet-to-come development. The reason why we take both these legs side by side is the fact that Iraqi leaders build their calculations upon these two factual and hypothetical scenarios. If, in politics as in other areas, conceptions of actors are more important than 'facts' obtaining on the ground, these conceptions are in themselves facts, i.e. factors to be examined.

#### **IV-Changing Polarization, Changing Fears and Hopes:**

Iraq's democratization from above under US-led occupational authority, led to the rise of identity politics, whose Islamic character was conducive to deep sectarian divide. As demography, in the case of identity politics, works as democracy, empowerment of Shi'i Islamic groups in Iraq was ill-tuned with the established polarization in the region, that divided its regimes into radical anti-US (Iran and Syria), and moderate pro-US regimes (Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, etc.). In fact, the rise of Shi'i Islamism in Iraq disrupted that old polarization (in place since at least

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1970), and triggered a shift towards sectarian regional confrontation; this shift was further deeply enhanced by the electoral successes of Islamists in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, while the Syrian militarized and growing Islamized rebellion added more weight to this polarization.

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Iraq's fears and hopes vis-à-vis the Arab world, before, during and after the Arab spring, can well be thoroughly examined by scrutinizing its conflicting policy towards Syria.

During the phase of civil war in Iraq, 2005-8, Iraqi Shi'i Islamic politicians loathed Syrian (and other Arab countries, notably Saudi Arabia) political and logistical support for armed fundamentalists (al-Qaida groups), they even appealed to the UN Security Council; only to stop short by dint of Turkish mediatory efforts. Oppositional Sunni leaders, notable the deposed Ba'th, Syria (in addition to other 'Sunni' Arab states) was a haven and a patron. Kurds were largely neutral.

Once Syria was engulfed in turmoil, and once the growing Islamic character of the new elected governments became clear, positions changed.

A sense of Sunni encirclement developed among Shi'i leaders, who began to rethink their tactics and strategy: more rapprochement with Iran, mediatory efforts between opposition and the regime of Bashar al-Asad, while allowing Iran a corridor to transport armaments to Syria, or let Iran commission Iraqi fighters (from 'Asa'ib al-Haqq, Leagues of the Righteous, a splinter group from the Sadr faction). In addition, Iraq extended loans to Syria on the grounds that sanction would hurt people not governments. The fall of Syria is, in their eyes, a threat to national security, i.e. the security of the current government. They never showed any sign of welcoming the Arab spring; the only support voiced for them was confined to Bahrain, where a Shi'i majority exists.

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By contrast, Sunni politicians, of all ideological shades, welcomed the Syrian rebellion, on democratic or Islamic-sectarian terms. The Sunni provinces adjacent to Syria (Anbar, and Mosul), welcomed Syrian refugees, inclusive of reportedly wounded

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Free Syrian Army combatants. The civil protest movement in these and other provinces is largely emulating their Arab counterparts, in the hope to end what they conceive of as marginalization by what they term as 'Shi'i tyrannical regime'.

The third element in Iraq's policies towards

Syria is the Kurds. This is obviously because a Kurdish element exists in Syria. Political and logistical support is extensively extended by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), in an attempt to secure a foothold for the Kurds in the rebellion, and create facts on the ground for the future when a new political is reconstructed to allow for some version of Kurdish autonomy in Syria.

Iraq then is pursuing three different, conflicting policies; its major hopeful or fearful concern is a colossal Sunni encirclement or help, whereas some fears or hopes of renewed Iranian upheaval ala 1979 or 2009 also haunt or relieve their thoughts.

The fall of Assad will undoubtedly bring Iraq closer to Iran, and exacerbate the drive to hyper-centralization in Iraq, much to the marginalization of a broad array of Kurdish, Sunni and even Shi'i forces. This trajectory would hardly be reversible so long as Iran's opposition remains silent.

