

## **Roundtable Discussion**

*America Abroad's Deborah Amos discusses the Islamic Republic's influence in the Middle East with Karim Sadjadpour, an associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Ash Jain, a visiting fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.*

**DEBORAH AMOS (DA):** Even before the recent uprisings in the Arab world, there was a lot of talk about Iran's influence in the region. It's deeply engaged in Iraq, Iran is reportedly supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan, it's closely allied with Hezbollah in Lebanon, and now we have the recent uprisings across the Arab world. Does Iran stand to benefit from these upheavals? And exactly how?

**ASH JAIN (AJ):** I would say that Iran certainly will be looking to exploit the opportunities that the fall of these, in many cases, American backed regimes have created. The fall of these regimes has been a longstanding goal of the Islamic republic. Iran has a track record of exploiting these weak and fragile democracies across the region – in Iraq and Lebanon and Afghanistan. The fact is that the fall of these regimes opens up a more hospitable environment, and Iran will be looking to cultivate relationships and partnerships with some of the political parties that it would like to see gain power and influence.

**KARIAM SADJADPOUR (KS):** I think that you really have to look at it country by country. In the case of Egypt, I don't think that Iran will win because I think a more assertive, proud Egypt in the Middle East is going to be to Iran's detriment. I think in places like Bahrain, where you have a potential Shiite majority population unseating a Sunni minority, then it is to Iran's benefit. But as a general rule of thumb, I think that Iran wins when the Middle East is in the throes of tumult and carnage and chaos, which bring oil prices up much higher. I think that that's Iran's strategy for the Middle East and I think that Iran loses when the Middle East has greater stability, greater democracy, and less popular frustration.

**DA:** At the same time, the Iranians, on a propaganda level, have made these parallels between the Islamic revolution and the revolutions in Arab countries. I'm not sure if the youth are buying that parallel, but nevertheless—can you see evidence of a strategy to try to make some points with these revolutions?

**KS:** For 30 years now, since the 1979 Iranian revolution, Iran has argued that the Arab world, and the Arab populations will follow in their footsteps. The fact that many of the uprisings, which have happened throughout the Arab world, have been led not by the Islamists, but by secular youth, has embarrassed the Iranian government. What I would say is that in the short term, when we see power vacuums—whether it's Egypt or Bahrain or Yemen or elsewhere—I think Iran will try to influence the outcome. But I think in the medium and longer term, Iranian influence in the Middle East is very much self-limiting. To quote former US ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, "The harder Iran pushes, the more resistance it gets." We've seen this play out in Iraq in many ways. Even amongst Iran's Shiite co-religionists in Iraq, we see in opinion polls that when they're asked about Iran's influence in their country, the reaction is overwhelmingly negative. They feel like Iran is not playing a constructive role in Iraq.

**DA:** These revolutions really don't talk about Islam. These are not bearded young people; in fact they're middle class, college educated young people. Does that in some way give Iranians pause about who these people are and what the future is in the region?

**AJ:** It's absolutely correct that these youth movements are largely driven by secular students and young people and others who have no interest in establishing any kind of Islamic republic, or anything close to what the Iranians would ultimately like to take place. But that said, I think the real concern is that over the medium and long term, Iran will do in Egypt and in other places what it has done successfully in Lebanon and is starting to do in Iraq—and that is to cultivate relationships with political parties that share its like-minded views about the West and about American imperialism and the like. In Lebanon, for instance, Hezbollah has only 10% of the seats in parliament, and yet after this long-term investment that Iran has made in that organization, the group is now poised to control the next government. We're seeing that same investment with the Sadrists and other Shi'a groups in Iraq. And in other places where there aren't these potential Shi'a alliances—in the Palestinian territories for instance, Iran has invested in recent years in Hamas, and has reaped the rewards with Hamas becoming a real stable force in the Gaza strip.

**DA:** Let's shift just a minute and talk a bit about sectarianism, which in some ways does favor Iran, especially in the Gulf. As we all know Iran is a Shiite Muslim majority, the Arab monarchies are Sunni—how important is it that Iran shares this common religious bond with Shiites in Lebanon, Iraq, and in particular in Bahrain?

**KS:** I would argue that actually the more sectarian comes out in the forefront, in a way that's to Iran's disadvantage. The reason why that is, as you mentioned, that Iran is non-Arab, it's predominantly Persian, and it's Shiite not Sunni. But the Middle East is predominantly Arab Sunni. So Iran's plans to dominate the Middle East, and to project itself as this pan-Islamic power, are in a way made more difficult when there's more polarization between Sunni and Shiite. So sectarianism can kind of be a Pandora's box whereby it's in Iran's interest in certain countries, let's say Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, but it could be inimical to their interests elsewhere to portray themselves as a sectarian power rather than a regional pan-Islamic power.

**DA:** There has been an escalation and a polarization inside Bahrain about how to fix this between the Shiite majority and the Sunni rulers. Does Iran, even in the medium term, benefit from what has happened in Bahrain?

**AJ:** Well Bahrain is critically important. Not just because of the Fifth fleet, but actually—

**DA:** And this is the American fleet that is based in Bahrain?

**AJ:** Correct. But more than that, the fact that it is, as Karim mentioned, a majority Shi'a country just makes it that much more important that the United States get this right. There's no evidence that Iran has been behind the Shi'a protest movement, most of the protestors appear to be secular activists, again not seeking any kind of Islamic state. But if this crackdown continues, and if the Saudi intervention is perceived as having been backed by the United States, and the Shi'a community then has no choice but to look elsewhere, they're going to look to Iran. They're going to look to the likes of Hassan Nasrallah and Moqtada al Sadr as champions for their cause.

**DA:** Do these events in Bahrain agitate Shiites in Iraq and in Lebanon?

**AJ:** Absolutely. And I think you see this is why Moqtada al Sadr has come out so strongly in trying to demonstrate support for the Shi'a in Bahrain. The Shi'a have long seen themselves as oppressed groups within their own countries and seeing what's happening in Bahrain plays into that sentiment. Certainly I think you're going to see these extremist leaders try to exploit that in their own countries to try to establish and maintain their support within their own communities.