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The leaders of the Arab world should learn from the Shah's mistakes—too little too late won't satisfy the people

The massive demonstrations in Egypt have rekindled memories of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Are the Iranian and Egyptian uprisings similar in their roots? Will Islamists take power in Egypt? Why didn't the Iranian Revolution spill over into the region, and will the Egyptian fallout follow a similar path? What lessons does Iran afford other Middle East rulers? What are the lessons for U.S. policy makers as they develop their strategy toward Egypt and other allies in the region?

There is no doubt that in the Shah's Iran, as well as in Mubarak's Egypt, there was widespread repression and dissatisfaction with the status quo—economic failure, corruption, social and economic injustice, political repression and a dictatorship backed by the United States. While a detailed comparison may be of little use, there are some nuances that deserve mention. Although economic growth and development were not sustainable in Iran in 1979, its economic conditions were generally superior to those of the Middle East North Africa region, including Egypt at that time. The average Iranian was better off economically in 1979 than today's average Egyptian (as indicated by per capita GDP and poverty levels). The Iranian Revolution was less about economic deprivation and more ideological than the Egyptian uprisings. Neither country had good economic institutions, the foundation of sustained economic growth and development. Good institutions are not in the short-term interest of corrupt regimes, because they would restrict the government's corrupt activities.

Although Egyptians have resented U.S. support for Mubarak and cooperation with Israel over a period of thirty or so years, Iranians perceived the Shah's regime to be even more closely allied with the United States, in part because of the overthrow of Mohammad Mossadeq in 1953 and the subsequent reinstatement of the Shah. Iranians felt that the Shah literally "owed" his crown to the United States.

When the clerics quickly took power in Iran four essential elements worked in their favor. First,

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Ayatollah Khomeini was the “spiritual” leader of the movement to oust the Shah, and his opposition had a long history. Second, Khomeini had the foresight to establish a constitution that put the clerics at the center of the regime; Iran’s constitution elevates one cleric to the position of Supreme Leader and appoints others as guardians of the revolution. Third, the number of clerics in Iran was estimated at about one hundred thousand in 1979. The clerics were tightly knit, and they had widespread access to the masses. Fourth, the taking of U.S. hostages and Iraq’s invasion of Iran solidified the rule of the clerics. This state of affairs does not reflect the situation in Egypt, nor is it likely to be replicated in a post-Mubarak system. Most importantly, Arabs might like Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, but only because Iran is seen as independent from the United States and other foreign powers. Other than that, Arabs generally see the Iranian experience as a failure.

The Iranian Revolution did not spark uprisings elsewhere in the region because there were many differences between Iran and its neighbors. Muslims from Iran to Morocco, with the possible exception of Iraq and Bahrain, did and do not identify with Iran’s brand of Shia Islam. In addition, most of the Muslims in the region are Arab and speak Arabic. There is a laundry list of conflicts between Iranians and Arabs. Finally, Iran’s long history as a nation, its 1906 constitution, the overthrow of Mossadeq in 1953 and the more pervasive role of the United States in its business made the Iranian experience different from that of neighboring countries.



Egypt is at the heart of Arab culture and identity. So the turmoil in Egypt is likely to have a very strong effect in other countries in the region because they share a number of important similarities: Most Arab countries have dictatorial regimes, are not independent and their rulers are perceived to rely on U.S. support. Most, even the rich oil exporters, have not developed good institutions and have lagged in terms of economic growth and development. And Arab countries are corrupt, cronyism reigns supreme and there is no sense of economic and social justice. As the Mubarak regime collapses, rulers in Yemen, Jordan, Libya, and Morocco, as well as in the entire GCC become increasingly vulnerable. Bashar al-Assad in Syria may be immune because of his willingness to use unlimited force to quell dissent. Iraq has already been transformed. And Lebanon is in the middle of its own special turmoil.

The extent of the spillover will also depend on how the Mubarak regime unravels, how rulers in the region react and how the United States implements its policies toward Egypt and other states in the region. Ironically, a transformation of Egypt could impact Iran, a country that wants to shed its clerical rule but is hampered by its armed forces—a group that is not as noble as the Egyptian military has been thus far.

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Iran's lessons are most important for other rulers in the Middle East and for the United States. The Shah's admission of failures and his response to popular demands were too little too late. At the onset of the first national demonstration, a regime might be saved if important concessions to meet popular demands are forthcoming. But if concessions come late in the game, and in dribs and drabs, then the demands will continue to escalate; demonstrators will be emboldened by each and every concession, and will settle for nothing less than the ouster of the regime.

Mubarak might have saved his legacy and exited in a more respectable manner if he had immediately proposed that neither he nor his son would ever again run for office and that the transition to the next election would be managed by a broad-based coalition of opposition groups with a prominent role for the army. After thirty years of dictatorial rule, how can the citizenry believe anything Mubarak says about his support for an orderly transition to democracy? In other countries such as Saudi Arabia, where the ruling family has been in power for well over seventy years, it may be even more difficult to believe anything that the Al-Sauds say.

Given the strong likelihood of spillover, other Arab rulers should act now. They should not wait until Mubarak is dragged down. By then, it may be too late for them to save themselves.

And what about the United States? What should Washington have learned? The United States has tried to perform a difficult balancing act—supporting dictators while touting democratic values, human rights and social justice—and this is becoming increasingly difficult to do in the Middle East. What's more, if Washington does not act soon, it may have considerably less ability to do so in the future. In the case of Egypt, the United States should have played less of a visible role. Let me explain. After supporting Mubarak for thirty years, any professed support for the Egyptian people will be seen as duplicitous at best. Moreover, the high-profile visit of veteran diplomat Frank Wisner gives the impression that Mubarak is America's puppet. Similarly, for Washington to talk about whether or not former IAEA head and current opposition leader Mohamed ElBaradei would be acceptable to the United States can only be seen as another indication of arrogant interference. The Obama administration should avoid such a label at all costs.

Finally, while it is understandable that the United States is afraid of accession of Muslim radicals to power in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East, it should recognize that the Egyptian uprising is not religious at its roots. Washington should distinguish between the true Islamic

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values of the Koran and the example of the Prophet Mohammad and the values espoused by political mullahs and imams.

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