

The Arab Spring and Iran: Speculations on the Political Sequence of Pre-Islamism, Islamism and Post-Islamism

Ali Ferdowsi

In this essay, I propose to speculate on the current, more or less popular, clamor for change in the Middle East and North Africa by including some reflections on the “*longue durée*” of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in my analysis. I call these reflections “speculative” because in them I will propose to go beyond what is immediately accessible to an empiricist observation, and engage, as someone who speaks from within the current situation, in speculations about a historical sequence that is far from being completed, and yet one must imagine it in the fullness of its elaboration in order to understand it. In other words, the following remarks are of the order of speculation in so far as they, by a process that mathematicians call “forcing,” imagines the history of a half-unfolded sequence as if it was already completed. This essay, nevertheless, is not an essay on prediction. By including Iran in the picture I do not suggest at all that the current revolutionary processes elsewhere in the region are foreordained to repeat a history that is more or less like the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran over the long duration of past thirty plus years. To properly understand my point, one must delink history from chronology. I must strongly and unequivocally emphasize this point at the outset, because in as much as

I understand the need of the markets and the political class for such predictions, I still believe that broadening our reflections to include Iran's Islamic revolution, as a revolution in which political Islam has had enough time to achieve its Hegelian realization, as it were, would compensate for this lack by allowing us to see the big picture more clearly.

As Iran is regularly excluded from most attempts at grasping the significance of the current revolutionary situation in much of the region, we must start by reflecting on this very fact, and ask why is it so, and how is this exclusion justified.

To begin with, this exclusion is not totally devoid of historical reason. Iran is at least thrice an outsider situated inside of the Middle East since the rise of the Safavid Empire in 1501. First, the Safavid Empire, as is well known, even before the Absolutist monarchies in Europe, declared an official religion for Iran. This religion was Shi'a Islam, thereby making Iranian state the only one of its kind from the period of gunpowder empires down to our time. With the exception of Iraq after the US invasion of that country (2003), and the tiny Republic of Azerbaijan after the fall of USSR (1991), Iran's neighbors in every direction for the past half a millennium were Sunni's. The Shi'a Iran remained, and largely remains, religiously unincorporated into the region, and in fact in the Islamic world, particularly at the state level. Second, Iran is a non-Arab country, and hence she is also linguistically isolated from most of the region. Last but not least is the matter of actual history, or history as shared governance. Perhaps no less important than the religious and linguistic differences is Iran's historical otherness with respect to the Arab world and Turkey. Whereas most Arabs and the Ottoman Turks were conjoined in the

framework of the Ottoman Empire, Iran stood, for a full half a millennium, outside a shared history that binds a large swath of the region. As a result, Iran is in a peculiar relation to the Middle East. She is an insider and an outsider at the same time.

This historic estrangement is exacerbated by more recent turns of events, particularly with the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran. What often is regarded as an Islamic Revolution in Iran has shown itself over the course of its unfolding to include a more or less pronounced element of particularistic Shi'a revivalism that in asserting its identity presses all too strenuously on its perceived past of victimization by the Sunni majority. When put in the above broader historical context, this Shi'a line of political energy in Iran, and consequently in the rest of the Shi'a world, activated the historic religious fault lines between the two sects in ways that makes the reconciliation between the two main branches of Islam harder, rather than easier. Shi'a religious leadership never managed to adequately and systematically reconcile the universally Islamic and the particularly Shi'a elements of its political revival.

Iran's mishandling of the Islamic valance of its Shi'a revolution, however, is not alone responsible for the increasing estrangement of Iran in the region. Sunni *ulema*, particularly of the Salafai persuasion that dominate Saudi Arabia, have spared no effort to push the Sunni world against any reconciliation with the Shi'a Iran. In short, the dream of Islamic Unity, advocated by the religiously ambidextrous Sayyed Jamal al-Din al-Afghani nearly a century and a half ago, which would reconcile all of Islam, the Sunnis as well as the Shi'as, in a unified political framework, appears paradoxically less plausible now that all of the branches of Islam are politicized. In fact, if the history of

USSR and Communist China, or Vietnam and Cambodia, during the hey days of political communism is any indication, intensely ideological regimes while professing the same ideology, and I prefer to place political Islam under the category of ideology and not under the category of religion, find it harder to unite than when politics is not ideologically hypersemiotized.

A less adamant way of restating the above hypothesis is to lament that with the politicization of all of Islam, it has become harder to say where religion ends and where political interest proper begins. Nevertheless, it is clear that on top of the religious and linguistic differences are superimposed real political differences that have underlying strategic reasons. It would be a mistake, for instance, to think that the current tense rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia over the plight of Assad regime in Syria, for which the Syrians are paying with their blood, is reducible to the divergent religious sympathies of the Shi'a Iranians for their Alawite brethren and Saudi Salafis for their fellow Sunnis. Clearly an irreducible political struggle over the strategic future of the region is at play here, in which Saudi Arabia represents the West in its resolve to deny Iran a regional Shi'a block that stretches from the Lebanese border with Israel, through Syria and Iraq, to Iran herself. Likewise, one cannot say that the divergent path of the Islamic government in Turkey with respect to Iran on regional issues is fuelled, mainly or significantly, by religious differences, including the political potency of the 400,000 or so Alawite Shi'as who live in Turkey. The differences are, to a goodly extent, strategic, and not totally unparalleled to the old Ottoman-Safavid rivalry. Turkish and Saudi Arabian policy on Syria, for instance, tend to converge because both wish to deny Iran a regional foothold in its Shi'a population. Now that the US is weakened in the region, such competitions over the emerging political map of the

Middle East can only grow. The strategic rivalry among emerging regional powers, in other words, also fuels the pressure to push Iran behind her borders and out of the regional affairs.

There are of course other, if you want, “super-structural” reasons at work in this reluctance to include Iran. Briefly, and related to everything said above, one may mention the nationalisms of the Iranians and the Arabs who find it mutually loathsome to acknowledge any indebtedness to the other. Incredibly, the Egyptian youth that used social media to wage their uprising against Mubarak’s regime acknowledged their indebtedness to every social movement, particularly the ones in Eastern Europe, but, in so far as I can tell by searching the internet, did not mention the June 2009 youth uprising in Iran. Reciprocally perhaps, the only youth in the Middle East that seems totally uninterested in learning from its counterparts in Egypt or Tunisia is the Iranian youth. Iranian youth seems to be even less affected by the mood of the Arab youth than Israel, the avowedly most exceptional country in the region, where Bouazizi like self-immolations have taken place.

Add to the above, the well-known and enduring division in Middle Eastern studies between the so-called Arabists, and the Iranianists. Few scholars study the region as such, and even fewer know both languages of Arabic and Persian. This general linguistic ignorance and its concomitant parochial interest lacks any intellectual justification, and is complicit, albeit unwittingly, in transporting political divisions into scholarly pursuits that have an undeniable regional history and context. No self-respecting “Europeanist,” if I may be excused to produce an analogy, would go about her business by only knowing a

single European language, or by excluding a country from her analysis due to religious, linguistic and political reasons.

There is more to be said on this reluctance, but I believe I have already said enough about it given the scope of this essay. Let me, then, recapitulate: There are real religious, historic, cultural, and ideological differences between Iran and the Arab world to confound the relevance of Iran's 32 years old experience with an Islamic Revolution for the rest of the region. But these differences are exaggerated owing to the political factors that find it in their interest to give Iran a pariah status in the political and, hence, the mental map of the region. To keep Iran away politically is one thing, to exclude it from political analysis quite another. It may be politically expedient to exclude Iran from the regional political affairs, but to ignore her in any movement of thought that wishes to capture the significance of present political moment in the region is intellectually depraved.

When I say Iran must be included in any deeper understanding of the current political sequence in the region, I do not mean simply as a political player, a so called state actor, in the international game of regional politics, along with other state singularities individually named, for instance, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, etc. This is certainly a worthwhile and all too common kind of analysis in political science and in politics. When I say Iran is being ignored, I do not mean from this kind of political science analysis. In fact, I am asking the opposite. I ask that we see the region, and not the states inside it, as the unit for historical analysis. In other words, I am contending that the "big history," or history as the site of the resolution of epochal issues, of structural transformations, unfolds not at the national, but at the regional level. Its bits and pieces happen in different countries and at

different speeds, but they all belong to a unified spirit that is regional in scope.

The first lesson to be drawn from the current clamor in the region is not that there are all sorts of differences between Yemen and Egypt, or between Bahrain and Tunisia, to the point of speaking of the “Arab Springs” in the plural. Obviously there are differences, as much between Yemen and Egypt as between Iran and Syria. And of course these differences are of real significance for immediate political action. In one place, say, Saudi Arabia, things appear quite and peaceful, in another place, Bahrain, an uprising was successfully suppressed, in yet another, Syria, a civil war is raging on, yet all of them belong to a single history, if by history we mean that which opens the possibility of a real future, a future that is not a mere extension of today. Consequently, the first and most important lesson to draw from all the specific cases over the entirety of the region and its recent history is that in spite of all these differences a single historic process, a process of regional transformation, belonging to a common *zeitgeist*, is unfolding. This is the point I wish to emphasize, and this is the point that legitimates my insistence in inscribing Iran inside of any understanding of the concrete actualization of this spirit.

What is this spirit? And what are the broad contours of its historic unfolding? To begin with, this spirit is a spirit, not of emerging, but of *re*-awakening. The emphasis on the “re” in the designation is deliberate for one cannot see the spirit of the times in the region beyond the exigencies of politics without dwelling on it. No doubt this region includes a number of humanity’s major centers of the invention of civilization. From Egypt to Iran, and beyond, this area is where great figures of thought, of arts, of religion, and of astonishing social and

economic organization have been invented time and again. Thus when speaking of the region, we are speaking, always already, not of a simple awakening but a reawakening; not the creation of something new in an old context, let us call it the “West in the East,” but the re-creation of a glorious past inside of a new situation. This spirit, and this is where I depart from the mainstream media and political science analysis, is not animated by what Allain Badiou names “a desire for the West.” It is not a desire for the tattered Western democracy or the rapacious gods of the capitalist market. It is not, as some Western journalists would have it, about them becoming more like us, by finally having what we have and they do not. The spirit of the current historic moment in the region cannot be understood by such simple ethnocentric assimilation of others, of understanding the other purely in terms of Western history and sociological categories. No, we do not live after the end of history and the last man; not in the Middle East, anyhow. The world is far from having been reduced to a single set of USA-like social, political and economic desires. If there is a term that in its yet to be articulated richness of the semantic promise best captures the demands circulating in the refreshing air of the “Arab Spring” is not “democracy” (as noted by many observers) but “dignity.”

Few would contest that a desire for dignity is the name of the current political moment in the region. Francis Fukuyama is correct when he names the spirit of these times in the region the “drive for dignity” in his article in *Foreign Policy* earlier this year (January 12, 2012). And he certainly nears the truth of the situation when he argues in the same article that the desire for dignity is irreducible to “rights” as defined in “utilitarian terms,” in his criticism of the “Anglo-Saxon ... tendency to see politics as a contest of economic interests.” But, he does not go far enough. If the ground of a certain tendency could be sought in a

particular tradition, here “the Anglo-Saxon world,” then why not extend the same hypothesis to “the drive for dignity” in the Arab context? For instance, not for a second does Fukuyama pause to consider that the subject of this desire for dignity may also be the group, e.g. the Egyptian, the Arab nation, the Muslim *ummah*, and not merely the Western-style solitary individual. The concept of dignity inside the heritage of the region is not reducible to “human rights,” and the right to pursue individual self-interests, without, of course, being necessarily opposed to them. It is not opposed to some concept of democracy, but it is not reducible to it either. It would be a grave sociological error to assume or pretend that “dignity” is an emotional and imprecise designation, a sort of poor native translation, for a desire for our “capitalist parliamentary democracy.” Those who, with a barely disguised know-it-all smirk, say, “Of course, we should not expect a Western-style democracy among Arabs,” are right, but for the wrong reasons. The youth of Tahrir Square are not yet destitute enough to resign themselves to desire a system whose own relations to human dignity is increasingly questioned. For the moment, vast majorities in the region desire something more dignified and meaningful than the “West.” Future, a future that is not either an extension of today in time, or an extension of the “West” into the times of the Middle East and North Africa, is still open in the unsettled revolutionary situation.

Admittedly the “drive for dignity,” needs a real concept, a phenomenological inquiry into its contents. What we have instead is the slapping of existing political science concepts onto the current situation in the region, and not the more interesting and fruitful attempt at developing this concept out of the region’s own historical and cultural grounds. The assumption is, even after the failures of the Bush doctrine in democracy-building in Iraq and Afghanistan, that whatever the

substance of this drive for dignity, if the West, or more specifically the US, supervises the current clamor correctly, some form of the victory of “free markets and free peoples,” in the words of Bush’s Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, in her article in July 27, 2012 issue of the *Financial Times*, may yet come to prevail. This outcome, the triumph of “free markets and free peoples” in the form of a capitalist parliamentary democracy that welds and mutually conditions an economic and a political regime together, is certainly that which names the desire *of* the West for the region. But following the current situation in our region, this much is clear to me: whatever the content of the concept of dignity, it is open to desires that are not reducible to a desire for the West, that would match this desire of the West. In fact a clear and incontrovertible aspect of this drive for dignity is the desire to throw off the domination of the West. One does not have to subscribe to Samuel P. Huntington’s audaciously formulated concept of the “clash of civilizations” to suggest that the Middle East’s desire for its future is not going to be the same as the West’s desire for the Middle East. Arabs, Persians, Turks, Kurds, Muslims, etc, are clamoring for their national, cultural and religious dignities. Nationalism certainly belongs to this drive for dignity.

We are finally in a position to bring various strands of the above speculations into a point that leads us to the central point of this essay: the fundamental lesson of Iran’s Islamic Revolution in so far as this desire for dignity, that is irreducible to a desire for the West, is concerned. At this juncture, let us take a step back and take a decidedly *a-historical* look at the current socio-political tendencies in today’s Egypt. I choose Egypt, because due to richer media coverage and the largely civilian nature of her political developments, things are somewhat easier to see in that country. But what I am about to say with

respect to Egypt applies, with caveats that do not reject its fundamental applicability, to every other country in the region, in particular Iran. A quick look at the line up of the political parties and groupings, and their platforms, shows that, broadly speaking, the sum total of Egypt's desires for a future of dignity, personal and national, is expressed in four fundamental tendencies: two avowedly Islamic, and two by and large secular, corresponding roughly to the four main presidential candidates – Mohamed Morsi from the Muslim Brotherhood who ended up becoming Egypt's first Islamic president, the runner up Ahmad Shafiq who represented the ruling forces of the status quo ante (those who wished “to return to January 24 [2011]”) including the still predominantly powerful military, Hazem Abu Ismail of the puritanical Salafi traditionalist Muslims, and Hamdeen Sabahi from the progressive nationalist left who surprisingly placed third in the first round of the presidential elections. After two electoral contests, the parliamentary and the presidential, it appears that the Islamic tendencies constitute a little more than the half to about two-thirds of the electorate.

Needless to say, these tendencies are fuzzy on the edges (as we can see from the banding and disbanding of groups during the elections) and there are a good amount of ideological and organizational mixture and overlapping. Another caveat: the power of the military is such that in any concrete analysis of political action and counteraction, it should be regarded as a political force onto itself. In the elections, the two Islamist tendencies strategically campaigned under the Muslim Brothers' firmly-held banner of “Islam is the solution,” a clear and strong determination of Islam over against the slogan of “Democracy is the solution,” and Shafiq ran against those who “want to see Egypt turn into Afghanistan or Iran,” a not so veiled reference to the Egyptian

Islamists, and Sabahi for a return to the ideals of Nasser's nationalist "revolution," which he termed "state capitalism." The difference between Sabahi, who represents the original impetus of the uprising as personified by the youth of Tahrir square in its early days more than any one of the other candidates, and the Muslim Brotherhood, over the strategic course of revolution is clearly expressed in their opposing stances on the 60th anniversary of July 23, 1952 revolution that toppled the Egyptian monarchy and brought the "Free Officers" to power. Whereas Sabahi and the youth of Tahrir Square believe that "the January revolution carries the mantle of the July revolution" into a democratic era, the Muslim Brotherhood "refused to join in the celebrations and... announced that the January 25 revolution has cancelled out the July revolution." In my view, and speaking out of the experience of the Islamic revolution in Iran, nothing speaks as much about the strategic goals of the Islamists as their foundational attitude with respect to national history, and to the relations of priority between religion and democracy.

With these caveats in mind, I believe that the strategic game of politics in Egypt is really a three-way game between the military and the supporters of the old regime who want to maintain as much of the January 24, 2011 as possible, the Islamists who dream of an Islamic society, and the those who express the original spirit of the January 25, 2011 uprising, that is those who desire a genuinely democratic Egypt that is subtracted from both the desire for the West and its nihilistic Islamist rejection. I can state this more provocatively, but no less correctly. The revolution in Egypt is far from being over. We continue to be inside of the revolutionary sequence. The revolution continues to face two forces that were already there when it burst into Tahrir Square—the ancient regime with its military, and the Islamic reactive

response to it. The three-way game may thus be expressed this way: a revolutionary potency that represents something genuinely new in the situation is up against two forces that belong to the old situation; with the latter being bound together as the two poles of the same field of power, and being ultimately anti-revolutionary. In this scenario, I fear for the revolution.

And this fear is rooted in the fate of the 1978-79 Revolution in Iran, for the same three-way game characterized those two years, and indeed the underlying historical currents in Iran of the past three decades. Things of course unfolded differently in Iran, for instance chronologically, because unlike Mubarak who “departed” in 17 days, the revolution in Iran evolved over a span of 17 months before the Shah was forced to depart. But in Iran too a revolution that desired to introduce something genuinely new into the situation faced the polarity of an old world in which a desire for the West and a nihilistic reaction to it faced each other. It is precisely at this juncture that the history of the Islamic revolution becomes paradigmatic for the region in so far as we can see the current situation in the region in one of its forms as a completed history. Let me pause and once again emphasize that to suggest that in the recent history of Iran we have a paradigm for a completed history of this three-way game is not to suggest that the Supreme Leader of Islamic Revolution of Iran’s dream of a future regional history that repeats the history of Iran is going to be fulfilled. A paradigmatic relation is not, as we know ever since Aristotle, a relation of repetition but a relation in which a class of phenomena is rendered knowable through the better knowability of one of its members. All I am suggesting, in other words, is only that the case of Iran makes other cases more knowable.

Specifically, I propose that we iterate the three-way game in the completed history of Iran's Islamic revolution and the state. I propose to imagine a political sequence, inclusive of Iran and other states in the region, in which the dominance of some kind of democratic political structure in Western Asia and North Africa, representing the genuine revolutionary aspirations of the region against the nondemocratic polarity of militarism and Islamism may be secured. This sequence, I believe, includes Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1979, the Arab Spring, and the 2009 popular protests in Iran against the fraudulent presidential elections that took place on the 12th of June of that year. Since these three events weave Iran and the rest of region together in a common sequence, then we could specifically ask what does the case of Iran tell us? And a question that has been repeatedly asked: Is the Arab world, by some three decades delay, having a version of its Islamic Revolution, or is what is happening there particularly in Egypt where, with due respect, things really and significantly matter, is similar to the suppressed, but by no means extinguished, Green Movement in Iran that erupted in protest to the contested 2009 Presidential elections?

At this juncture let me share with you the conclusion of my speculations once we reflect on this sequence. I believe that with this reflection we begin to see the contours of an abstract history of the region, an epochal history yet to be completed. The first thing that emerges from inscribing Iran in the regional history is that Iran is both behind and ahead of the Arab world, inside the political sequence that includes these three events. Giving the existing political sensibilities, I must hasten to add that I use this ahead or behind strictly in the context of this abstract sequence, and in no form or shape mean to imply any relation of inferiority or superiority on any evolutionary metric of political development or democratization. This scheme, once we

include the case of Iran, I believe goes something like this: from a form of secular authoritarian nationalist state, to a form of religious authoritarian state, and potentially to a post-religionist state, hopefully democratic. This sequence could be presented at the ideological level as: from nationalist awakening to religious awakening to democratic awakening. This sequence is more logical than chronological: i.e. this sequence may be traversed simultaneously and in a different order, in the direction of democracy or away from it, as the case of a kind of de-secularization in Turkey may suggest. I do realize that the devil is in the details and this abstract schema may fall apart as one descends in the direction of specifics, but I still proceed because I think an exercise in abstraction may be of some value in not getting lost in the welter of the particulars. To those who would dismiss these speculations as engaging in history as “grand narrative,” I can only offer my sympathy.

Let us start with Iran’s Islamic Revolution of 1979. More than three decades before Mubarak, there was a Shah, and an Iranian military with thousands of resident US advisors, a state in good terms with Israel, and with a political orientation, and a cultural style associated with the West. In this regard, what happened in Cairo in 2011 belongs to the same stretch in the sequence as does Iran’s 1978-79 revolution. It would be wrong to deny this fact simply because of the differing velocity or appearance of events that marked Iran’s Islamic Revolution. There is no evidence, for instance, to suggest that the Iran of pre-revolutionary period was in any shape or form more Islamic than the Egypt in the final years of Mubarak’s regime. In fact the evidence points to the contrary. The great Japanese social scientist, the late Morio Ono, for instance, shows in his historic monograph on Kheyabad, a dusty village in south-central Iran, that the villagers were not religiously observant months after the revolution had begun, and

began to assume an Islamic identity only shortly before the shah was deposed. Even today, after more than three decades of Islamic indoctrination, Iran remains a lot less Islamic than virtually every Arab country, including Egypt. In a 2006 Gallup poll, 66 percent of the Egyptians (the same percentage as those who voted for the Islamists in the parliamentary elections) agreed with the statement “*Sharia* should be the only source of legislation.” The comparable figure for Iran was only 13 percent (similar percentages were reported by Gallup in its 2007 and 2010 polls). The percentage of those who report that religion is an important element in their lives, and those who report going to religious places at least once a week is also lower among the Iranians.

So it is patently incorrect to believe that Islamic revolution, and following that the Islamic state, in Iran expresses something specifically religious about that country. Yet, the distinguishing feature of that revolution was the rapid and baffling emergence of a range of Islamist tendencies as the predominant political force. One could argue that the Islamic state in Iran was not, is not, and cannot be a Taliban, or for that matter a Salafi regime. Even the most extreme Islamic tendencies in the Islamic Republic are far more moderate than these, and besides, Iran’s deep and broad urban history, the half a millennium depth of its state, and the robust presence of women in its public spaces play a prohibitive role in this regard. If the Islamic Republic appears more Islamic than Egypt or Saudi Arabia it is mostly because of its non-compliance with the particular configuration of politico-economic interests that somewhat self-servingly calls itself the International Community. Substantially, however, Iran’s version of Islam, mind you as ruling political regime, is no less moderate than what passes as the main stream Islam in the rest of the region. Clearly nothing like the Salafi tendency (comprising a quarter of the votes cast in Egypt) is

conceivable in the Iranian context, for as we just saw, only one out of ten Iranians desire *sharia* as the only source of legislation, as opposed to 6 out of ten Egyptians.

We cannot pursue this matter any farther here, but what is important (that from which we can draw lessons) is that the Islamic Revolution in Iran was brought about by a popular protest which had two inter-related aspects: (1) It brought down a regime not unlike the ones toppled in Egypt and Tunisia, and (2) it fashioned itself increasingly into an identitarian Islamist political gesture in the same breath as it was bringing down the old regime (Note: due to length of pre-revolutionary gestation period in Iran much of what has so far happened in Egypt after the downfall of Mubarak, happened in Iran before Shah was deposed). In other words, the unfolding of the revolution in Iran was a double process of destruction and construction. Islamism therefore must be seen as much the cause as the *outcome* of the Iranian revolution. This double character of the history of the Islamic Revolution in Iran is of most important theoretical and methodological significance.

Today, if the Islamic experience in Iran figures at all in the Arab discourse, it does so negatively; primarily as an abject lesson for contemporary revolutionaries in the region, and hence of little or no importance in understanding what are the early phases of what may or may not achieve that structural level of transforming capacity in the Arab world that would truly place it under the sign of a revolution. We all have heard that the last thing Egyptians, including their Islamists of both Ikhwan and Salafi persuasions, want is to become like Iran. I understand what they say, for as an Iranian who supported the revolution and the late Ayatollah Khomeini, I can testify that many

Iranians, including many Islamists like President Khatami, Prime Minister Moussavi, Speaker of the Parliament Karrubi, too, did not wish to become like Iran either! None of these men, and many other major and minor leaders of the revolution who were later executed (e.g. Sadeq Qotbzadeh, its early foreign minister), or jailed or exiled (too numerous to name) ever imagined, even in their worst nightmares, that the revolution in which they fought and for which they paid dearly, would become so undemocratic and intolerant to turn against its own children. For nearly three years now the Islamic regime's prime minister during the taxing years of the Iran-Iraq war, and its speaker of the sixth Majlis (parliament) have been under house arrest, for much of it kept incommunicado. What Iran has become was not intrinsically inscribed in the impetus of the revolution. Iran became what it became, a cautionary tale for all revolutions, by unleashing forces, and by entering into processes, of which most Iranians too are as surprised as many Egyptians became with the expeditious gains of Islamists, particularly the Salafis, in their country. Compare the slogans of the Iranian and the Egyptian revolutions, and the utterances and promises of its Islamist leaders, as I have, and you will come away being as surprised as I am. At least at the verbal level, the Iranians asked for, and the religious leaders promised more, democracy than their Egyptian counterparts more than thirty years later. Ayatollah Khomeini famously promised to safeguard the rights of the communists to propagate their atheistic cause in an Iran that would be ruled by Islam.

It should not be surprising at all that Muslim Brotherhood promise democracy for all, and that they and the Salafis deny a wish to make Egypt become like Iran. Fundamentalist Christians in the US are most adamantly against Islam, and in some cities with virtually no Muslim population, they have already passed city ordinances that preemptively

ban the possibility of future passing of *shari'a* laws! They do this not because they are less religious, or wish to keep religion and state apart, but ironically because they are as zealously for the imposition of a Christian version of *shari'a* law, as are their Islamists counterparts for theirs. I want to draw the following conclusion: although all those who say they do not wish to become like Iran mean what they say, they do not mean the same thing (Or if you prefer an *Alice in Wonderland* formulation: They say what they mean, but they don't mean what they say). Most reject the Iranian Islamism the more so to impose a form of their own. Islamists, like Communists, cannot stand becoming like each other; they simply are or become so. As a revolution that has fully realized itself, Iran holds a mirror to all those political situations in which Islamists hold a preponderance of power. If Iran has lesson to teach the Egyptians in this regard it is not to trust the promises of the Islamists, but to make sure that they do not ever achieve their potential of gaining preponderance of power in the Muslim population of Egypt.

In the Islamic revolution of Iran, the departure of the shah was quickly followed by the collapse of the country's once mighty military. The three-way game in Iran, consequently, had to be played with one of the three tendencies, the secular authoritarian modernizers who desired the West, without an effective power. In Egypt, like in Turkey, this tendency which in all three countries was created with and alongside the military, continues to function as an effective political player, as we saw in the respectable poll results for Mr. Shafiq, himself an ex air force officer. The collapse of the "traditional" military, the emblem and instrument of authoritarian modernization (modernization as a desire for the West subtracted from democracy) in Iran, allowed the Islamist tendency, rooted deeply in the resources, institutional and ideological, of the old world, to proceed with creating its own state unencumbered

by having to engage, as must their counterparts in Egypt and Turkey, in a political tango with the military. That is how the nihilistic religious tendency, the tendency that in the field of the organization of human life is fundamentally, if not solely, defined by its negative reaction to the West, came to replace its polar opposite, and suppress what was genuinely revolutionary in the revolution—the creation of a new world by opening a truly new epoch in the region.

For thirty years, the revolutionary impetus, which had succeeded in bringing the shah down, remained in the condition of having a weak identity. This changed, radically and irretrievably in June 2009 during the massive uprising in Iran that followed the disputed June 12, 2009 presidential elections. And that is why it must be included in the sequence in order for us to be able to isolate what is the genuine revolutionary impetus arising out of the Tahrir Square. Viewed inside of this inclusion, the spirit that appeared on January 25, 2011 in Cairo is not a desire for Muslim Brotherhood, nor is it a desire for returning to Mubarak regime *sans* Hosni Mubarak. Governments and business may think and do otherwise, but those who wish to truly support the Egyptian revolution should support its genuine revolutionary spirit: neither Mubarak nor Islamism, neither the West, nor a nihilistic rejection of the West. This is precisely the spirit of the June 2009 uprising in Tehran.

The significance of the June 2009 historic moment in Iran requires that we examine it a little more specifically, particularly as it is another thing about the place of Iran in the current sequence that is forgotten. This forgetfulness is astounding for we are speaking about something that happened barely a couple of years before the Arab uprising, and it dominated the global news long enough for it to have been registered.

Many people still remember the strikingly beautiful face of Neda Agha Soltan, the 27 years old student, who was shot dead by the agents of the Islamic state in the first days of the ant-government demonstrations. Yet, even if remembered, the June 2009 is rarely mentioned as part of the current regional political sequence.

So let us recall: If there was a shah before Mubarak, there also was a youth uprising in Tehran before the one in Cairo. That uprising most certainly belongs in the same sequence that includes the Arab Spring. It too was driven by the youth and relied heavily on social media. It too was about dignity. In sheer size, in the use of social media and in the role of women, in fact, it surpassed anything we have seen ever since in the whole of the Middle East and North Africa. In one of the rallies, 2.5 to 3 million people peacefully marched for miles. As repeatedly reported by journalists, nowhere else in the region such levels and degrees of women's participation were to be seen. President Obama, to his credit, understood that. In his Persian New Year greetings to Iranians on March 21, 2011, the US president, referring to the Arab Spring, noted, "We all know that these movements for change are not unique to these last few months. The same forces that swept across Tahrir Square were seen in [Tehran's] Azadi Square in June of 2009."

The June 2009 uprising that lasted for months was remarkable for a number of reasons. First the fact that a real presidential election was taking place, and that people were participating in it with all the seriousness such political events deserve. The uprising was about the outcome of the votes and not the right to it. I was in Iran during that summer, and I can say that the presidential campaigns were serious and meaningful, and the choices no less clear and consequential than the ones found in a typical US presidential elections. It is very important to

understand what essentially happened here inside the sequence of democracy and voting. People were on the defensive: they were protecting a right they had. They were not on a revolutionary offensive to gain a right that they did not have. This is a crucial point, a paradoxical point. They were facing the death of a revolution, the erasure of the last vestiges of the original revolutionary impulse in the event of the 1978-79; they were not waging a revolution! The June 15th rally started from the Revolution Square and headed towards the Freedom Square, an ironic truth that was not lost on the marchers. “Turn your back on the Revolution, and march towards Freedom!” that was the oft repeated order of the march.

But these are not its most important characteristics. What is of major significance is that the event of June 15, 2009 marked a turning point in the regional political sequence. I want to submit to you that on June 12th 2009, the Islamic Revolution in Iran finally annulled itself, and reduced itself to a regime that came to power inside of a revolution as its reactive supplement. By finally fully emptying the principle of voting of any content, the contradictory logic of an Islamic Revolution resolved itself in the shape of a post-revolutionary Islamist dictatorship. The regime in Iran is no longer a *revolutionary* regime. In other words, the unfolding of the Islamic Revolution in Iran took a whole thirty years. This is how long revolutions may take before they fully reveal and exhaust themselves. With the decomposition of the Islamic Revolution, Iran has entered a new period of political re-composition. This new period announced its daybreak on June 15, 2009, astoundingly just three days after the terminus of the Islamic Revolution. In other words, June 12, 2009 marks the end of an Islamist sequence of politics in Iran, and June 15 of the same year the beginning of a new sequence of politics that would be decisively post-Islamist.

To recapitulate the big sequence for Iran: (1) From roughly about WWI to 1978-79, Iran experienced a period in which a military/nationalist state developed in which a desire for the West, subtracted from democracy, held power. Another name for this ideology is “modernization.” (2) Almost from about the same time a reactive Islamist tendency emerged which mirrored the modernizing state in its nihilistic rejection of the West that included its democracy. These two tendencies opposed each other inside the same world and as its polar opposites. (3) All through this period but only as an “inexistent” of this world, a genuine desire for justice, and for a world in which the collective and the individual dignity of human existence was the foundation of politics persisted and grew. (4) The period that lead to the 1978-79 revolution began with the genuine revolutionary desire of this inexistent force that wished to enter and transform the world in accordance with its own desire which was neither for the West, nor against the West, and was not subtracted from democracy. But this revolutionary desire was weak, lacking in organization, military and institutional depth, and ideological clarity, and hence could not achieve sufficient intensity to change the world. The reactive force managed to use the unsettled revolutionary situation, and by partially assimilating aspects of its spirit, to come to power. (5) As the military/nationalist tendency collapsed, perhaps due to preventable causes, the Islamic state, lacking any serious countervailing force, gradually and systematically purged its ranks from any genuine revolutionary sentiment, purified itself of anything of that spirit that it had assimilated in the course of the revolutionary upheaval. (6) Following the electoral coup of June 12, 2009, on June 15th the genuine spirit of the 1978-79 revolution that had remained weak and not fully identical with itself, declared itself with an intensity of identity that heralded the start of a new revolutionary

sequence. The history of Iran's near future, in other words, has already happened. Briefly, then, the history of state in Iran went through the two phases of a modernizing state, and an Islamist state; and it is now already inside of the third phase.

Why is this characterization important for the region? First, it tells us that looking at the history of the region as a whole we are still inside that stretch of the revolutionary sequence in which Islamist forces play a dominant role in the region. We have a long way to go in countries like Egypt, and I would go so far as to include Turkey, before we see the outcome of the rise of the political Islam. I am, of course, not predicting that this rise, and eventual demise of political Islam, will take a form exactly similar to the one it took in Iran. The Egyptian and the Turkish military, among other reasons, could make it very hard for developments to take on the exact same shape they took in Iran. Second, and most importantly, in so far as this analysis contains elements of truth, Iran is perhaps the only country in the region in which a new sequence of politics, a sequence that moves away from Islamism, a process of de-Islamization, has already begun. So while from the point of view of the ascendancy of Islamism, no matter its shape and form, the rest of the region is somewhere inside of the sequence of a kind of Islamist "revolution," Iran is, from this very same perspective, already at the start of a *counter-revolution*; a charge regularly leveled against the adherents of June 15, 2009 uprising by Mr. Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the *Revolution*.

The foregoing is obviously too schematic and admittedly too mechanical and static to convince anyone; but I hope I have managed to encourage you to include Iran inside the very act of reflection on the political and historic *spirit* of the contemporary Middle East and North

Africa, for the history of the Islamic Revolution in Iran is certainly one possible course for the unfolding of the clamor that has just begun in the region. Without insisting on a linear progression of its sequential distribution, this course, I tried to suggest, includes three moments in its configuration: pre-Islamism (non-democratic secular nationalism), Islamism, and post-Islamism. If the case of Iran has any lesson to teach us in our coming to grips with the political trajectory of the region, it must therefore be the following: a post-Islamist democratic type of sovereignty is possible only in so far as it understands itself as the overcoming of an Islamist reactive interlude.