

**IRAN IN THE ARAB SPRING: DISCOURSE AND POLICY**

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**Özet**

Tunus'tan başlayarak Suriye İç Savaşına kadar devam eden süreçte belli başlı benzerlikleri olsa da her ülkede farklı bir etkiye sebep olan Arap Baharı, Ortadoğu'da bölgesel dinamiklerin değişmesinde oldukça önemli bir rol oynamıştır. Halk ayaklanmalarının iktidar değişikliğine yol açtığı bir durak olmasa da İran İslam Cumhuriyeti meşruiyetini korumak için değişen bölgesel dinamikler ışığında farklı söylemler ve politikalar şekillendirmiştir. Bu doğrultuda çalışma, İran toplumunun, Ortadoğu coğrafyasındaki değişim ve dönüşüm sürecini nasıl algıladığını ve olaylar doğrultusunda nasıl bir politika modelinin izlendiğini analiz etmeye çalışacaktır. Bu analiz çerçevesinde iç ve dış etkenlere bağlı farklı söylem kalıplarına odaklanılacaktır. Bu bağlamda ilk olarak İran rejiminin Batı karşıtı muhalefetinin şekillendirdiği İslami Uyanış söylemine yer verilecektir. Ardından madalyonun öbür yüzündeki reformistlerin demokrasi ve özgürlük odaklı konuşmaları analiz edilmeye çalışılacaktır. Çalışmanın son bölümünde ise Arap Baharının İran'a ilişkin sonuçlarına ve değişen bölgesel politikalara yer verilecektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Arap Baharı, İran, İran Dış Politikası, Demokrasi, İslami Uyanış

**Abstract**

Arab Spring, has impacts every country, has caused the regional dynamics in the Middle East to change. Even though popular rebellions are not a stop, Iran has shaped different discourses and different policies in the light of changing regional dynamics. In this direction, the study will analyze how Iranian society perceives the change and transformation process in the Middle East geography and what kind of policy model is followed in line with the events. Within the framework of the analysis, different discourse patterns due to internal and external factors will be focused. In this context, the Islamic Awakening discourse shaped by the anti-western opposition of the Iranian regime will be included. Then, the speeches of the reformists on the other side of the coin focused on democracy and liberation will be analyzed. In the last part of the study, the results of the Arab Spring on Iran and the changing regional politics will be included.

**Keywords:** Arab Spring, Iran, Iran Foreign Policy, Democracy, Islamic Awakening.

**Introduction**

The latest democratization movements in the world started in the countries that gained their independence after the dissolution of the USSR. While the world was rapidly democratizing in the early 21st century, despotic leaders in the Middle East geography maintained their autocracy-based regimes by following a successful isolation policy. The most destructive reaction of the peoples to the dictatorial leaders, who have successfully protected their regimes without repressive and democratic principles for years, was in 2010. These popular movements, called the "Arab Spring," started in Tunisia and influenced many countries. The people who tried to sleep for years now woke up and began to fall into the

streets. These popular demonstrations, which can be described as great awakening, have been attempting to reach democracy and freedom by directly targeting dictators.

I generally try to analyzed what kind of foreign policy Iran pursues in the face of developments in Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria. In the light of all these evaluations, it will be discussed whether the uprisings that occurred in the domestic politics and the dual structure of the Iranian society in the face of the Arab Spring have created opportunities for Iran or new crisis areas.

### **1. Democratization Movement with a Domino Effect in the Middle East: The Arab Spring**

The Arab Spring which started in 2010 with the burning of a Tunisian teenager, was the first step in the revolt movements launched against dictatorial leaders. This rebellion movement, originally envisaged only as a small and insignificant protest, sparked the wick of a democratization movement that would have created a domino effect in the Middle East.

Street demonstrations and protests in Tunisia have spread to other Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, and Syria through social media and turned into a mass popular movement (Şen, 2012: 97). The people were beginning to take to the streets to end the dictatorial leaders who were far from democratic principles and did not reflect the legitimacy of the nation. These settlements for democracy were developing differently in each country. The leader Zinedin el Bin Ali, who perceived the protests, getting stronger in a short period in Tunisia, which is accepted as the starting place of the events, fled the country. Similarly, the revolution, which started in Tahrir Square in Egypt and lasted only 18 days, ended with the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, the sympathizer of the USA and Israel. In Libya, Gaddafi gave up and toppled in a bloody way after a long civil war (Çelik, 2015: 39).

In the geography of the Arab Spring, the citizens of many countries had reached their request. The leaders who ruled the despotic and their people by their own rules were overthrown. These countries had come "so-called spring," but instead of spring, they took their place in other circles of the chain in the winter countries. The Assad Regime, which does not want to be one of the dominoes that fell when we look at the example of Syria, has resisted and resisted the insurgency that has escalated at the expense of expelling its people their homeland and killing them.

Iran, which is one of the critical regional powers in the Middle East, has managed to maintain its stability in its country when we compare it with other countries. This movement, which led many countries to the chaos and civil war that would continue for years, had impacted not only on a national scale but also on a regional and global scale. While it resulted in the destruction of despotic leaders in the national sense, regional powers began to change, and new crisis areas began to emerge for the countries (Calabrese, 1998). In this regard, it is still controversial whether the peoples are fighting for democracy, which eats the most significant share of the cake, or the Western states that have established their influence in the Middle East on a more solid basis.

### **2. Islamic Line in the Arab Spring: Leader, Regime, Politics in Iran**

In 2005, for the Iranian people, Khatami's reformist line referred to a radical disconnect. President Ahmadinejad, who took office as of this date, has initiated returning to conservative

and Islamic politics, inherited by Khomeini. Ahmadinejad, who adopted radical rhetoric and policies, has turned the lead to reformists in domestic politics because he acted in a way contrary to revolutionary procedures (Golkar, 2010: 13). In foreign policy, it has waged war against the United States and Israel. Ahmadinejad and the then-Guide, Ayatollah Khamenei, have followed a strict audit policy to keep the social opposition in control, which poses a significant threat to the regime. As a result of these policies, Ahmadinejad became president again in the 2009 shady elections, taking 63% of the vote despite having a strong candidate like Mir Hussein Musavi against him (Jafari, 2009). After the elections, the regime's nasty attitude and the recent counting of the ballot reinforced the public's assertion that Ahmadinejad was cheating. Upon the spread of these allegations, citizens organized in a short period and raised the flag of rebellion against the regime with demonstrations organized on the streets of Tehran with the slogan "Where is My Vote?" (Gürakar, 2017: 18). This insurgency movement dubbed the "Green Movement," was the first large-scale mass community organization since the Islamic Revolution. It was made history because it showed the administration (Yücesoy& Karabulut, 2019: 25). The "Green Movement," which was soon controlled by the 'Revolutionary Guards,' has led to a deepening of social tension between reformers and conservatives.<sup>1</sup> This factionalization in society will also be reflected in Iran's rhetoric against the Arab Spring.

In this period, the regime adopted a very radical and aggressive attitude in foreign relations and domestic politics. Despite the reconciliation policies adopted during the Khatami period, the evaluation of Iran within the framework of the "Evil Axis" caused Ahmedinejad to change his attitude. Accordingly, Ahmadinejad, who criticized Khatami's overly accommodating attitude in foreign politics, stated that Western powers could only understand from a harsh perspective. Therefore, he emphasized that for Iran to regain its control in foreign policy, military measures should be increased in foreign policy, and more deterrent policies should be followed (Daşdemir, 2017, pp. 69-70). Ahmadinejad has made nuclear diplomacy impasse, making it clear that he has made his radical position on foreign policy, predominantly nuclear. After taking office, Ahmadinejad described nuclear studies as one of the most natural rights his country has. Accordingly, he stated that efforts to develop projects based on nuclear reviews and uranium enrichment would continue (Erdoğan, 2013: 61). However, in making this statement, Ahmadinejad stressed that the activities would be peaceful in order not to face the reaction of European states.

Nevertheless, the decision was not accepted by Western powers, and the problem was transferred to the UNHCR. The UNHCR has imposed two separate sanctions on Iran's nuclear efforts. However, sanctions resolutions have been met with a backlash from the president, who has made atomic work a matter of honor. Accordingly, the regime that did not end its nuclear career has raised tensions in foreign relations considerably (Erdoğan, 2013, pp. 63-64).

Ahmadinejad's foreign policy rhetoric is mainly shaped in line with us and anti-Israel sentiment. Ahmadinejad's foreign policy rhetoric is shaped primarily online with us and anti-Israel sentiment. In this period, unlike in previous periods, he took his place in the category of

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<sup>1</sup> Although the green movement was briefly suppressed, the danger and conservative-reformist tensions increased. This tension will enter a period of softening in 2013 as a result of the election of Hassan Rouhani, a reformist candidate, as President.

hostile countries in Israel. The regime, which has been particularly critical of Israel's position towards Palestine, has always said it will stand by Palestine. Iran will face many sanctions, both economic and political, due to its hostile attitude towards the United States and Israel (Daşdemir, 2017: 71).

### **3. Iran's Rhetoric During the Arab Spring**

The Arab Spring, which began in 2010, has emerged when domestic and foreign relations in Iran are becoming increasingly strained. In this respect, Iran's rhetoric against the Arab Spring has been shaped in line with both social developments in domestic politics and foreign policy preferences.

During the Arab Spring, Iranian society was a bilateral structure due to the polarization of conservatives and reformists. This division in society was reflected in the rhetoric both in domestic politics and in foreign policy. The Iranian people were divided on the Arab Spring. Officials and senior leaders described the Arab Spring as an anti-Western "Islamic Awakening." Social opposition groups, on the other hand, saw the Arab Spring as a democratization movement, emphasizing the masses' rhetoric focused on justice and liberation (Uygur, 2012: 11).

#### **3.1. Radical Discourse: Arab Spring as "Islamic Awakening"**

While shaping the Iranian regime's rhetoric towards the Arab Spring, it has considered regional dynamics and developments in domestic politics. There was a possibility that public movements in various countries would spread to Iran. For this reason, the Iranian regime was concerned about the revival of the "Green Movement," which was briefly suppressed in the Arab Spring and 2009 and strengthening the opposition. Because the rhetoric on rising democratization and liberation in countries in the region was like the rhetoric adopted by the reformist bloc in Iran (Duran & Yılmaz, 2012. p. 38-39). Therefore, the conservative regime has imposed partial censorship of the media to prevent a possible grassroots movement. Media outlets did not include the wishes of peoples such as freedom and democracy in the conflicts in Arab countries. The events were reflected in Iranian society as an act of rebellion against the West and Israel (Şen, 2012, pp.101-102). On the one hand, using the media, the Iranian regime, which is spreading Western and Israeli propaganda, has tried to block a possible opposition movement.

At the beginning of the Arab Spring, the Iranian regime maintained its silence for a while and pursued a passive policy based on observing events. After a time, the Tehran administration, confident that the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt will not spread to Iran, decided to break its silence. More clearly, the administration approaching events began to see the Arab Spring as "Islamic Awakening" (Şen, 2012: 11).

First, the Iranian government developed a discourse based on the idea of "revolution issuing," Khomeini heralded in 1979. According to the authorities, the Arab Spring, which has influenced middle eastern countries, began due to the expulsion of the Islamic revolution in 1979. The Iranian regime likened the masses who fought against dictatorial leaders during the "Jasmine Revolution" in Tunisia and "The Events of Tahrir" in Egypt to Iranian society fighting against the Shah, an American ally, in the 1979 Revolution (Plattner, 2011, pp. 5-12). Later in his speech, he said that after the end of these events, the United States and Israel would take significant blows.

Within the framework of this rhetoric, the uprisings and riots that took place in countries were a revolt of the Islamic world against the "secular dictatorships" that were western supporters. According to the rhetoric of "Islamic Awakening," the main reason for the mass uprising was that leaders were repressive and authoritarian. Still, they started a fight against leaders acting under the United States and Israel (Şen, 2012: 101). The struggle of the masses was an anti-imperialist and Islamic struggle against the West rather than being democratically qualified. As a result of the success of this struggle, the region would be free dissipated from Western powers and secular governments, and Islamic regimes would come to power. The religious wing of the Iranian regime emphasized the Islamic dimension of their struggle, while its political wing emphasized the anti-imperialist size of the uprisings (Abrahamian, 1993, pp. 17-18).

The rhetoric developed by the Iranian regime was not accepted by opposition groups, particularly in Egypt and Tunisia. Contrary to what is alleged, they have stated that they are distant from the Islamic Revolution and do not follow an Iranian model (Rakel, 2007, pp. 161-162). Accordingly, in September 2011, the Iranian regime organized an "Islamic Awakening" Conference in Response to other Arab Countries, particularly Turkey, pursuing an active policy in the region. The primary purpose of the conference was to emphasize Iran's strength and rhetoric in the area. Ali Akbar Velayati, the former foreign minister, said that "Islamic Awakening" began under the leadership of Shiites and that Iran was the most appropriate candidate for leading Islamic countries (Uygur, 2011, pp.13-14).

The rhetoric of "Islamic Awakening" has become inconsistent upon the development of events in Syria. The ideological and economic support regime of the Iranian regime, which is a supporter of opposition groups in many countries, has caused contradiction with the "Islamic Awakening" rhetoric of the power of support for the Syrian government in line with its real political interests in the region. According to the Iranian regime, the struggles that emerged during the Arab Spring were fought against western countries and secular leaders. However, the support of Assad, the most secular leader, compared to other Arab countries in the circumstances of the period, clearly illustrates the contradiction between rhetoric and politics (Wedeen, 2015: 34).

The Tehran administration has developed a new discourse in line with its interests in Syria to end the discrepancy between politics and address. Accordingly, the Iranian regime has stated that it considers the opposition's struggle in Syria to be a "designed game" organized by Western countries and Israel (Şen, 2012, pp. 107-108). In 2011, Khamenei explains why he adopted an anti-opposition policy in Syria:

"Our dream is clear; Wherever there is an Islamic, populist, and anti-American movement, we support it. If a movement somewhere was provoked by America and Zionists, we won't support it. Wherever America and the Zionists stage to invade a country and overthrow a regime, we'll be on the other side" (Sinkaya, 2011, pp. 38-48).

Thus, the Iranian regime has tried to legitimize support for the Syrian government on an international level within the framework of the new rhetoric developed.

### **3.2. New Discourse: Arab Spring as a Democratization Movement**

The reformers, which stand opposite the Iranian leadership and pro-regime forces, have opposed the "Islamic Awakening" rhetoric developed for the Arab Spring because it was inadequate. According to reformers, the conservatives ignored the emphasis on human rights,

democracy, and political rights by the revolting masses. The disingenuous rhetoric of the regime based on its interests in domestic and foreign policy has been criticized for reducing the struggles of the Arab people to an anti-US and anti-Israel effort (Uygur, 2012: 11). According to reformers, the uprisings should not have been judged in a simple anti-Zionism and anti-imperialism. The Arab Spring was the beginning of the late demands for democracy in the Middle East geography, which has been ruled by dictatorial leaders for years and isolated itself against democratic regimes (Arıkan, 2011:31).

Another focus of criticism from the opposition was the introduction of the 1979 revolution as a model. According to reformers, the struggle of Arab societies was based on the "Green Movement" model, which took place in 2009 and unites many people from different layers of society for democracy (Şen, 2012: 102).

For reformists and pragmatists, the Arab Spring promised a resumption of the unfinished struggle for democracy in 2009. Emboldened by this hope, the reformists took to the streets again on February 11, 2011, in support of the battle of Egyptians and Tunisians. In addition to supporting Egypt and Tunisia in the demonstration movement, which is described as "25 Behmen", slogans such as "*Cairo or Tehran, death to the tyrants!*" were chanted directly targeting the Iranian regime (Arıkan, 2011: 34). The most striking of these and the often used "*Tunisia succeeded, Iran failed. (Tunes tunest Iran net nest)*" was the slogan (Uygur, 2012: 15). However, the Iranian leadership has not remained silent on these slogans and the demonstration. The regime has managed to prevent the demonstration with its military measures and restrictions on social media. Thus, the opposition has once again been defeated in the face of the repressive regime.

The regime's rhetoric of "Islamic Awakening" was criticized by reformists as well as by some senior officials. The most striking example of this is the testimony of then-president Ahmadinejad. Ahmadinejad, who had a slate with Khamenei in the final years of his rule, described the events in Tahrir as "Human Awakening" (Uygur, 2012: 16). Khatami, the former president of the reformist wing, has been particularly critical of the regime's rhetoric on Syria. In this respect, Khatami stressed that the regime should be fair and consistent in its policies towards all countries of the region.

#### **4. Iran Politics with Changing Regional Dynamics**

Initially, like other countries in the region, Iran did not foresee that the demonstration, which began in Tunisia, would turn into a mass grassroots movement that would expand its violence and scale. Contrary to what was expected, the Arab Spring, which created a wave effect, turned into a chain of protests and clashes in countries in the region. In the first period, the Iranian regime chose to remain silent for a while because it did not make sense of the rapid spread of the uprisings. Therefore, it took weeks for events to be reflected in the Iranian media, and media reports on the issue were made (Şen, 2012: 100).

In the first phase of the Arab Spring, Iran's hopes for the Middle East were on the rise as pro-Western leaders overturned (Akdoğan, 2012: 473). The collapse of each regime one by one meant the lifting of obstacles towards becoming a regional power. As a significant threat in foreign policy, US influence in the Middle East was shrinking. In this respect, there was a plane in which Iran could implement its revisionist policies in its favor and gain geopolitical interests. On the other hand, the Arab Spring was an essential step towards the overthrow of secular

governments in the Middle East and the establishment of religious regimes instead. Thus, Iran would have the opportunity to increase its religiously-based political system (Oğuzlu, 2011:34).

The Arab Spring also created an opportunity to repair Iran's broken relations with the countries of the region through new regimes and to end its loneliness within the area. In an interview on June 12, 2012, Kayhan Barzegar, head of the Institute for Middle East Strategic Studies in Tehran, commented on the Arab Spring for Iran as follows:

"The Arab Spring is an opportunity for Iran. With these Arab revolutions, we see new independent nationalist-Islamist views emerging among the Arab peoples. Previously, conservative Arab regimes blocked such ideas that were more involved in Western powers. In this context, we think that Iran sees this as an opportunity to establish new relations with Arab states" (Yaşar, 2013: 43).

In general, in the first place, the Arab Spring was a very positive and impeccable picture for Iran. The overthrow of Zeynel Abidin bin Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt was welcomed by the Iranian regime (Uygur, 2011: 3). The overthrow of pro-Western leaders and replaced by authorities along the Islamic-conservative line gave Iran hopes to improve relations with them. Morsi, who came to power in Egypt after Mubarak's resignation, decided to restart diplomatic relations with the Tehran administration (Akdoğan, 2012: 474). However, the alliance between Egypt and Tehran has been a stalemate in Syria due to Iran's pro-regime policy.

Another of Iran's hopes for the Arab Spring was the possibility that the uprisings in the Gulf states could succeed. One of Iran's most essential goals in foreign policy since the Islamic Revolution was to expand the sphere of influence of Shiite communities in the Middle East. Iran's expansionist policy using Shiites in this direction has been perceived as a threat by other Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia. This has exposed an ongoing Sunni-Shiite tension in the Middle East, starring Iran and Saudi Arabia since 1979. During the Arab Spring, Iran's secret support for the Shiite insurgency in Bahrain has stirred tensions. Saudi Arabia's response in the face of Iran's support will be very harsh. In 2011, the Saudi government briefly suppressed the Shiite insurgency with its troops to Bahrain (Nuruzzaman, 2013). Thus, Iran's hopes of turning the balance in the Middle East in its favor were nullified by the Shiite uprisings that emerged during the Arab Spring.

The Arab Spring's splash to Libya and finally Syria has gradually exposed the flaws of the positive picture drawn. For example, creating a self-maneuvering area of Western powers through NATO in Libya has been a significant danger to Iran. The escalation of events in Syria will lead to a complete stalemate in Iran. The escalation of events in Syria will lead to a complete deadlock in Iran. Iran, which looks at its geopolitical interests<sup>2</sup> due to escalating conflict in Syria, will stand by the Syrian government as its "30-year ally" (Sinkaya, 2011: 39). Faced with the risk of deteriorating relations with Turkey and other Arab countries, one of its most significant competitors in the region because of this policy, the Iranian government would have understood that the Arab Spring would not bring him a full spring.

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<sup>2</sup> Syria is a port for Iran with Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Hamas organization in Palestine. Aware that if the regime in Syria falls, Iran has supported the Assad regime, which is aware that its interests will be in jeopardy.

As a result, it is impossible to consider the Arab Spring as a chain of crises or opportunities only for Iran. Due to the Arab Spring, the change in regional dynamics has had different effects on Iran. In her study, Bayram Sinkaya examined this process in 3 different periods. According to Sinkaya, in the first period, Iran saw the Arab Spring, which created crises in many countries, as a chain of opportunities for him. New regimes that came to power on Middle Eastern soil meant correcting relations with countries in the region for Iran.

In the second period, the development of the Arab Spring at a devastating scale in Syria will create new areas of crisis for Iran. In the process, the Iranian leadership's support for the Assad regime will be met with a backlash from countries in the region. This will result in Iran becoming increasingly isolated and losing credibility in the Middle East (Sinkaya, 2011, pp. 54-58).

In the third term, the new regime sought to soften strained foreign relations after Hasan Rouhani was elected president in 2013. However, despite following a moderate policy, He has not been very successful in resolving relations with the countries of the region (Afshin& Tabrizi, 2020).

### **Conclusion: Is the Arab Spring an Islamic Awakening?**

The unforeseen developments of the Arab Spring movements have led Iran to develop different policies and rhetoric by taking care of its real political interests. Initially, the Arab Spring was a potential risk factor by the Iranian regime. On the other hand, for the masses on the reformist wing, the Arab Spring was hope for the resumption of the democratic movement, which was launched in 2009 and quickly suppressed. However, contrary to what was expected, the regime soon strengthened its repressive control mechanism to prevent a possible grassroots movement. At this point, the Arab Spring has now become seen by Tehran's administration as a chain of opportunities.

The Iranian regime's changing perception of the Arab Spring has led to different rhetoric. Within the scope of the rhetoric that took shape in the first place, Iran was said to be a model for popular movements. According to the regime, the uprisings followed the 1979 Iranian Revolution model. Following this rhetoric, the Tehran administration, which developed a more assertive discourse, began to describe the developments as an Islamic awakening of society against the West and Israel. According to them, the success of societies would end to secular regimes and pro-Western leaders in the Middle East. Thus, the Middle East would be more Islamic and more Westernly-influenced geography.

The first important point to discuss here is whether the Arab Spring follows an Iranian model. Given the developments, the 1979 Iranian revolution has not served as a compass in the struggle of the peoples in any way. The masses who spilled out onto the streets did not glorify Khomeini or shout slogans that judged Iran in the category of exemplary countries. According to the masses, the 1979 model was the beginning of endless anarchy and conflict in Iran. Therefore, Iran is one of the most vivid examples of what should not be done, rather than a model that needs to be followed.

The second focus of the debate is discourse, which reduces the struggles to Islam and anti-Western. The struggles in the Arab Spring process are not narrowly comprehensive enough to be judged on an Islamic scale only. In this respect, the Arab Spring should be treated as a social awakening that includes Islamic elements. In their struggle, the masses have mainly

targeted "repressive," "authoritarian," and "bullying," rather than the secular or pro-western attitudes of regimes. In this context, the Arab Spring is more like the Green Movement in 2009. Like the masses who wanted to have the order used in Tehran, Arab societies were put on the streets because of the coups that hit democracy and freedom.

As a result, the rhetoric of the Iranian regime was created with national and regional interests in mind. For this reason, Syria, which is accepted as a turning point, has made the contradictory structure of the discourse defended more concrete. Iran, which is the supporter of opposition groups in every country, has supported the Assad regime, secular and Sunni in Syria. The support given by considering the real political interests is essential in terms of revealing the inconsistency of the discourse. Accordingly, it was understood that Iran was pursuing a hypocritical policy, and its image was reset in the countries of the region.

In this respect, it is understood that Iran is pursuing a hypocritical policy, and its image has been reset in the countries of the region.

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