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## Iranian Clerics About to Fall?

Abbas Milani

Abbas Milani reports that the coup is coming to Syria. Assad will go. Iran's clerics are about to go with him.

Iran's clerics are afraid. Very very afraid. With Syria in shambles, they rightly wonder if their alliance with Bashar al-Assad and his cronies will herald the end of their own despotic reign.



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The Syrian regime has been Iran's most reliable—indeed sole—ally in the Muslim Middle East. Tehran has handed over billions of dollars to keep Syria in its grip. In recent months there have even been allegations that units of the Iranian military—and its special forces, the Qods Brigade—have been sent to Syria and used as Assad's personal storm troopers.

Yet as Syrian democrats continue to surprise the world with their tenacity, the long-sustained unity between Syria and Iran is beginning to fray. The Iranian regime's public statements are discordant. And this is both tactical

—intended to confuse the world, and existential, reflecting the massive fissures and warring factions in the power centers of Iran. Initially, Iran offered unmitigated support for Assad. Today they are pulling back. The

Iranian clerics want to claim both that the Arab Spring was inspired by their own Islamic model and yet Syria is meant to be the exception—nothing but a conspiracy designed and acted out by Israel and the United States. When Turkey, increasingly a rival to Iran for influence in the Muslim world, sided with the Syrian democrats, when polls in countries such as Egypt show a sharp decline in the popularity of the Iranian clerical regime among Muslims, when there were increasing signs of Sunni concern about the possible existence of an Iranian conspiracy to reestablish a “Shiite empire”—a concern specifically voiced by some members of the Syrian opposition—the Iranian regime began to gingerly but discernibly distance itself from Assad. Iran’s foreign minister declared that Syria must listen to the voice of its people, followed by another statement by Ahmadinejad reiterating much the same position. He even proposed hosting a meeting of Arab Muslim leaders to find a collective “Muslim solution” to the problem. Unless we do something now, he told them, the same thing will happen in all Arab states!

## Iran and Syria are kindred spirits. Both are pseudo-totalitarian regimes that rule in the name of an ideology.

Iran and Syria are kindred spirits. Both are pseudo-totalitarian regimes that rule in the name of an ideology: in Syria, the Ba’ath ideology that is an odd amalgam of European fascism and Arab nationalism; and in Iran the theory of *velayat-e faqih* that is an eclectic mix of Shiite beliefs in the clerical interpretation of law and Plato’s notion of the need for the absolute rule of the philosopher king. In both countries, a small minority that considers itself the state’s ideological custodians rules over a reluctant majority with an iron fist. In both countries, the ruling minority stays in power with the help of a well-greased, oppressive intelligence, militia and military apparatus. Both regimes are distrusted Shiite minorities in the Sunni-Arab

dominated Middle East. Both countries have hitherto weathered their political storms with the economic help of outside forces: in the case of Syria through substantial subsidies received from Iran, and other rich Arab states; in Iran through the sudden unexpected rise in the price of oil. In both, the absolute ruler for life—Khamenei in Iran and Assad in Syria—were anointed through virtual palace coups and certainly without a popular election. They both threaten and intimidate their neighbors and foes through support for terrorist organizations. They both consider Lebanon their turf, and use Hezbollah as their instrument of choice. As Shiites, they both believe in *tagiyeh*, or equivocation, a concept central to Shiism that allows the pious to lie and cheat in the service of their faith. These affinities are arguably at the heart of the 40-year dalliance of Iranian and Syrian despots.

Now there are clear signs that beneath the conservative camp’s intransigent

support for Syria, Khamenei and his cohorts are concerned about the possibility of Assad's fall, and its consequences in Iran. In a meeting of the Council of Experts (an 86-member body of clerics nominally entrusted with the task of supervising the work of the "Supreme Leader") the most noticeable hint of change was the prominent place afforded former president Rafsanjani. Until a few weeks ago he was a virtual persona non grata in the Council and among the conservative camp because of his ostensible support for the clerical opposition. Now, in official photos of the meeting between Khamenei and members of the Council, Rafsanjani is shown prominently, sitting right next to Khamenei. Moreover, the leaders of the Green Movement, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karubi, now in prison for more than 170 days, were granted much-publicized visits with their families. These are all clear signs the hard-line clerical rulers are in deep trouble—and they know it.

A Syrian Spring of democracy could well catalyze the end of Iran's long cold winter of despotism.

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