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Editorial Team

Evangelos Venetis, *Editor in Chief,*
The Middle East Research Project, ELIAMEP

Evangelos Tembos,
Research Associate, ELIAMEP

George Tzogopoulos, *Web Editor*
Bodossakis Post-Doctoral Fellow at ELIAMEP

Thanos Dokos
Director-General, ELIAMEP

Editorial Office

Hellenic Foundation for European and foreign Policy - ELIAMEP
49, Vas. Sofias str., Athens, 10676, Greece
T.: (+30) 210 7257110
Email: mideast@eliamep.gr; venetis@eliamep.gr

Middle East Mediterranean (MEM) is an unbiased bimonthly publication of the *ELIAMEP Middle East Research Project*, focusing largely on geopolitical and economic developments, debates as well as policies, affecting the future of the Middle East. Having a global outlook MER hosts analyses, commentaries, interviews and news, conducting research in the fields of politics, economics and culture in the Middle East and adjacent areas, such as the Eastern Mediterranean.

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Analyses

The Arab revolt and social media

*George Tzogopoulos, PhD,
Bodossakis post-doctoral fellow, ELIAMEP*

This analysis deals with the role of media in the ongoing developments in the Arab world. It is emphasized that Social media are a useful tool but they are not the factor shaping catalytically political developments in the region.

The ongoing developments in the Middle East and North Africa have led to a reconsideration of politics in the region. On the one hand, this affects the work of policymakers in Europe who should now practically promote the transition to democracy in countries such as Egypt, Tunisia and Libya. And, on the other one, this is relevant to the academic orientation of scholars who need to learn lessons from the past looking towards the future and the transformation of the Arab world.

Along with the debate on politics and foreign policy, there is another discipline which has been significantly influenced by the unprecedented events in the Middle East and North Africa: communication and media studies. Obviously, attention is not turned towards traditional forms such as the press, radio and television but on the so-called social media, in particular

facebook and twitter. The critical question which arises is the following one: what was (is) the impact of twitter and facebook on the Arab revolt?

At a first glance, the answer which is given emphasizes on the importance of social media. Indeed, this view provides an easy and convenient tool to explain developments. Noting that it was principally a young generation of demonstrators which started the protests against the authoritarian regimes, the theory gains additional ground. Moreover, supporters of this theory can also argue that the revolts took place in 2011 and not in previous years due to the lack of similar means of communication in the past. As they explain, the young generation of protesters benefited from the usage of social media and successfully led a fight to oust

leaders Ben Ali, Mubarak and Gaddafi.

The suggestion emphasizing on the important role of social media in the Arab revolt has certainly become a popular one. It seems like a trend which is followed – inter alia – by journalists. The *BBC*, for instance, presented in September 2011 two episodes entitled: ‘How facebook changed the world: The Arab Spring’. Internet archives also produce similar results when the lemmas facebook and/or twitter are put together with Arab Spring in various search engines. Frequent references to this theory, especially by global media, influence elite and public opinion on the matter.

Putting aside the enthusiasm on the role of social media and the hopes for a democratization of the region, however, a deeper analysis is required. For the time being, there is a lack of empirical data which can necessarily link facebook and twitter to the Arab revolt and then measure and assess their impact. These tools are relatively new and the outcome of their usage is not preordained. In the case of Egypt, for instance, there are testimonies of young people saying they were systematically using social media demonstrating against Mubarak. Nonetheless, it remains unknown how many of them had internet access and at what specific junctures they did access the web. Furthermore, written messages in facebook and twitter are not

automatically followed by deeds and their linkage cannot be confirmed.

On that basis, a rather cautious approach would be a wiser choice in the attempt to offer an answer to the afore-mentioned question. Social media can be regarded as a useful tool but should not be seen as the catalytic factor shaping political developments in the Middle East and North Africa. Means of communication help people to achieve their goals but do not cause governments to collapse.


In any case, the idea that the media play a supporting role in political and social change is not a new one. Professor at New York University Clay Shirky reminds us that during the Cold War, the United States were continuously investing in a variety of communication methods such as the Voice of America but this itself cannot explain the fall of the Soviet Union if economic change is not taken into account. In the era of globalization and technological advancement a lot has of course changed. Social media are an important product of this impressive process. Nevertheless, the main argument on their impact still remains the same.

Another aspect which can contribute to the debate on the role of social media is the one suggesting that authoritarian regimes are using them for their own purposes. There are scholars such as Evgeny Morozow who believe that these

regimes can be strengthened by accessing facebook or twitter. Here, along with the cases of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya that of Syria is of increased interest. That is because Assad's government has extensively browsed the web to search for dissidents spreading fear in the country.

There are media reports which concentrate on the attempt of the Damascus regime to control the internet. A *Reuters* electronic story published in July 2011, for instance, deems social media as 'a double-edge sword' in Syria. The piece includes quotes from young Syrians who say they were scared for their political activity in facebook and twitter. It also refers to US officials, who talking to *The Washington Post* in

May 2011 had revealed that Tehran was providing Damascus with sophisticated techniques to track down opponents via the internet.

The case of Syria clearly demonstrates that authoritarian regimes can indeed use the web to achieve their goals. Whether they are doing so in an efficient way or not is a debatable issue as examples from recent history have produced contradictory results. In any case, future developments in Syria will be pivotal for this discussion and the literature of media and communication studies in general. We have to wait and see. 

The Shiite-Sunnite Rivalry and the Arab Spring

Evangelos Venetis
The Middle East Research Project, ELIAMEP

This analysis focuses on the Sunni-Shiite dipole and considers the intra Muslim rivalry of equal, if not greater, significance than that of the modernization process. It is stressed out that as long as the Sunni-Shiite rivalry persists, modernity falls back in the mind of Muslims in political terms.

The Middle East has always been an area of special global geopolitical significance. Ongoing political developments in the Arab world are crucial for the future of the entire region. In contrast to the stereotyped concept, that Islam is an unchangeable and non-progressive cultural entity, Islamic societies have shown historically a stable and dynamic evolution in all fields including economy. Recent political events in the Middle East, linked to ongoing economic and social developments, verify this argument. In the last century the region has been at a transitional stage attempting to redefine codes of political, economic and cultural nature within the framework of modernity that the West has dictated.

This transitional stage, going back to the colonial past, is analyzed mainly in two levels. The first one refers to the nature of modernization

per se in a Middle Eastern-Islamic framework, i.e. secularization vs. tradition as this is embodied in the political-religious system of Islam. The supporters of secularization and nationalism in the domestic political scene of each country tend to represent trends similar to those of the Western world. By contrast, regarding the second level, as this is represented by Muslim traditionalists, they shape their worldview based on Islamistic trends which are characterized by 1) an opposition toward modernity, which, in their view, is not compatible with the main principles of Islam; 2) the Sunni-Shiite rivalry within the community of Muslim scholars and politicians. The history of the Middle East in the past century has shown that despite efforts by the upper ruling class to modernize the society based on the concepts of nationalism and secularization, the core of the society stands firm to the traditional

Islamic approach of politics and life as a whole. Having that in mind and without neglecting the significance of the secular-liberal part of the domestic political world in each country, the Sunni-Shiite rivalry has a central role in contemporary political developments in the Middle East. It is suggested in this paper that the intra Muslim rivalry is of equal, if not greater, significance than that of the modernization process.

The aforementioned dipole is intimately associated with the so-called “Arab Spring” and the goals that each political group aims to achieve throughout this process. The dipole is actually there, in the streets of Baghdad, Cairo, Manama, Damascus, Khobar and so on. Both antitheses are on the table: on the one hand modernization in the form of liberalization of politics vs. Islamism, and the Sunni-Shiite strife on the other. The latter is attested not only in the circles of Islamists but also amongst secular politicians and governments. For instance it is interesting that the Arab League which is dominated, almost exclusively by western-like “moderate-modern” governments, coped coldly with the recently emerged Shiite government in Baghdad.

The Sunni-Shiite struggle is attested almost in every ongoing conflict in the region: in Syria, Iraq,

Lebanon, Bahrain, Yemen and the case of the Iranian nuclear programme. In regard to Islam, instead of the homogeneity that a common religion could ensure for them, Muslims prefer a deep rooted antagonism between Shiites and Sunnis. Iran since 1979 and Iraq in the last few years have contributed to the strengthening of the Shiite geopolitical influence vis-à-vis the dominant Sunni regional regimes. Saudi Arabia is the great competitor in this game. The Bahrain crisis is set in this dual context, albeit it received its operational inspiration by the Arab Spring movement. The deterioration in the domestic scene of Bahrain threatens the stability of the rest regional Sunni regimes, including the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia, even Yemen.

The Sunni governments view with concern the Shiite influence coming from Iran and Iraq and in response they favor the ideological and operational support of Sunni populations inside Iran and Iraq. In this context Baghdad accuses Riyadh of supporting and deploying Sunni fighters against the Shiites in Iraq. Similarly Tehran views the role of Riyadh, Kuwait and other regional Sunni governments with suspicion regarding Arab Sunni separatists in Ahwaz.

Another aspect of religious conflict in the eastern shores of the Arabian Peninsula is the type of

ruling system that each side pursues. Whilst the Sunni Arab ruling elites have adopted a semi-secular version of monarchy, some of the Shiites support a more liberal regime and some others a more conservative theocratic system. , a system which Iran wishes to export to other regional Shiite populated countries. Expectedly enough this is a major source for mutual distrust at a regional level.

In the last century the majority of Arab countries are run under a pro-West secular authoritarian political system administration. This hybrid political system cannot be identified neither with the Western nor the Islamic political tradition. The well-established governments are currently viewing with concern the ideological demands of the emerging bourgeoisie for political reforms and freedoms. The result of the ideological conflict between the existing political system and the urban middle class is their open clash in the streets of major cities.

Except Iran, having Shiites ruling Sunnis in Iraq is an unprecedented breakthrough in the history of Islam in the Arab world, for Sunni Muslims have ruled the Shiites since AD 661. This development has an impact on the foreign policy of Iraq vis-à-vis Iran and the rest of the Arab world. This religious gap is widened by the fact

that Iran is the leading force of Islamism in the Middle East and exerts major influence in Baghdad. During Saddam Hussein's era, and especially after the eruption of the Iran-Iraq war, most of the current Shiite political elite members in Iraq (e.g. the Hakim and the Sadr families) spent most of their time in exile in the Shiite-ruling Iran. Today not only do they keep close ties with Tehran but they make sure that they strengthen them, viewing their co-religionists in Iran as a culturally familiar and strong pillar in the crack of dawn of their political rule in Iraq. As a result Arab leaders view the Iraqi Shiite-led government with great caution and suspicion. What the Arab leaders have not considered so far, due to their strong religious sentiment, is that by distancing themselves from their fellow Arabs in Iraq, they actually accelerate and multiply the Iranian influence in Iraqi politics because by acting thus they create a major power vacuum in the foreign, and internal, relations of Iraq, a gap which Tehran is eager and ready to fill with her own action and presence. This Arab attitude manifests that the role of culture and religion is predominant in politics in the Middle East.

The Allawite political elite of Syria ruling the majority Sunni Muslims of the country is viewed with mistrust by major Sunni countries. The reason behind this

negative political attitude of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and other states to the Shiites of Iraq is primarily religious and secondarily political.

In Yemen everybody interprets the revolt in political terms as a sign of tribes being indignant to the absolute rule of al-Saleh. Although the tribal element is crucial in the Yemeni crisis, one should have in mind that almost more than a year ago Yemen was destabilized by the revolt of the Shiite Houthis in the north. The Houthis are still there, participating in the ongoing revolt but they are opposite to the Sunni Salafist groups of the South.

The case of the revolt in Egypt is also interconnected with the Sunni Shiite rivalry as far as the Palestinian Issue is concerned. In the last two decades, the emergence of Hamas as the protagonist in the struggle of the Palestinians for independence has been the result of a close ideological connection between the Sunni Hamas movement and Shiite Iran. Their connection took place within the Islamic framework based on the principle that Muslims must united against the common enemy. This kind of Sunni-Shiite coexistence is really rare in Islamic history and unprecedented in modern times. Interestingly enough after Mubarak's deposal, Egypt's foreign policy toward the Palestinians altered

drawing the interest of Hamas for closer collaboration with Cairo.

As far as Bahrain is concerned, apparently the ongoing crisis will last longer than initially anticipated. The outcome of this revolt will lead political and geopolitical developments in the region. If the Shiite demands for liberalization of Bahraini politics prevail, then Bahrain will become the third Muslim country in the region where the Shiite version of Islam will be dominant. In comparison to the Bahraini Shiite revolt in early 1980s, Bahraini Shiites now are inspired also by a new development: the success of their co-religionists in Iraq. Hence it is expected that sooner or later the Bahraini Sunni ruling elite will have to meet the demands of the Shiite majority and give the latter more freedoms and political role in domestic politics.

Although Iran and Saudi Arabia are the traditional foes in the Shiite-Sunni dipole, the emerging role of Turkey in this struggle is particularly interesting. Representing a "soft" version of Islam, Turkey encompasses both Sunni and Shiite forms of mystical Islam. The role of Turkey has created skepticism in Tehran about their role in Mesopotamia and the Levant. Turkey is trying to enter the picture by putting her own, mainly economic, heavyweight in Syria. Hence Turkey demands her own

share in the regional developments and to act as the Sunni leading Islamist power in the Middle East. The ambitious aspirations of Turkey pose a challenge both for Tehran and Saudi Arabia and it is expected that it will contribute to a multi-polar geopolitical frame.

The preceding analysis has highlighted some aspects of the significance of the Sunni-Shiite

dipole within the framework of the Arab Spring. Both levels are interconnected because the Sunnite-Shiite rivalry manifests strongly the religious-traditional political orientation of the Arab and generally Islamic world. As long as the Sunni-Shiite rivalry persists, modernity falls back in the mind of Muslims in political terms.

Comments

The Arab Spring and the Palestinian Issue

Aref Alobeid

*Center for Defense, Energy and Geopolitical Research
University of the Aegean*

This commentary highlights the role of the Arab Spring in general and in Egypt particularly with regard to the Palestinian issue. The author argues that the political turmoil in the Arab countries has led to a reconsideration of the overall attitude of their governments about Palestine.

The recent overthrow of some of the Arab regimes has altered the political map of the region, especially after the fall of Mubarak and the return of Egypt to the chessboard of the Middle East. The prospect of the Arab spring spreading to the Palestinian territories, mainly at the expense of Fatah, is quite likely due to the negative social and economic circumstances (unemployment, poverty) and the different types of attitude and mentality of the two political powers. Fatah in the West Bank suffers from extensive corruption, affecting directly the lives of citizens. On the other hand the conservative movement of Hamas in Gaza Strip prefers a more traditional Islamic model of government which is at odds with modernity and liberal aspirations of

the middle class in other Arab societies.

The Arab Spring has boosted diplomacy in regard to the Palestinian issue. After ten years, the government of Aoun Al Chasaouna allowed members of Hamas to settle in Jordan informally. This highlights the tense relations between Syria and Hamas with the latter favoring a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis, and being against a military solution as this is applied by Damascus. Furthermore, the rapprochement between the two wings (Hamas-Fatah), a development closely related to the policy change in Cairo, will not be completed if there is no national unity that will take into account the new political data in the area of the Middle East. The integration of the movements of Hamas and of the Islamic Jihad in the provisional

leading scheme of the Organization for the Liberation of Palestine, the completion of the exchange of hostages between Hamas and Israel with the help of Egypt and the opening of the Rafah passage between Gaza and Egypt on a permanent basis are considered as consequences of the Arab Spring. Also the emergence of new Islamic groups, such as the extreme Islamic group for the Unification and Struggle, denotes that Hamas's sovereignty in Gaza is becoming increasingly vulnerable.

The association of peace prospects with the Jewishness of Israel and the construction of the wall on the west bank exacerbated the already negative political climate between the Palestinians and Israelis. As Bill Clinton claimed in the past the policy of Israeli Prime Ministry Netanyahu, is responsible for destroying the peace talks. Today the new pressure of Saudi Arabia on the U.S. to contribute to the solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict is a significant step in resolving the Palestinian issue. Beside this, various factors related to the domestic affairs of Israel, such as the support of several leftists in Israel for establishing a Palestinian state that is recognized by 127 countries, the economically motivated protests of Israeli citizens for the first time in the history of Israel and the isolation of Israel after the deterioration of its relations with some Muslim

countries, such as Jordan, Egypt and Turkey, suggest that peace in the Middle East is needed now more than ever.

Despite US pressure, President 'Abbas was successful in his efforts to promote a UN recognition of a Palestinian state as a full member at the borders of June 4, 1967 with its capital in east Jerusalem. These diplomatic developments can help in accepting the nomination of Palestine in other international organizations. Recently, Palestine became a member of UNESCO. Moreover, the effort of integration of Palestine to the International Court in The Hague is of concern to the Israeli authorities because they may allow Palestinians to appeal against Israeli officials for war crimes and against the civil settlements. Although there is no official position, the majority of Palestinians living in Israel since 1948 support the claim of appeal to the UN. Furthermore some circles in Hamas have expressed openly their reluctance to claim membership in the UN. A group of people shows silence, thus implying that they support this move, while another group strongly opposes the move because it denies the right of return to thousands of Palestinian refugees living in foreign countries. Perhaps this reluctance results from lack of confidence of the Palestinian Authority.

Some Israeli officials have termed the action in the UN as dangerous and threatened to terminate negotiations for peace and to increase the pace of building settlements in the Palestinian territories which is the main thorn for the continuation of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. Worth noting is that the Israeli concern about the political developments in the Arab world in general and Egypt in particular has led to the increase of the defense expenses of Israel for the first time in 30 years

The support of the recently emerged pro-Islam governments to the Palestinians is expected to isolate Israel further. Arab public opinion

on Palestine is central and will be taken seriously into consideration in the decision making procedure by the new Arab governments.

Finally, it should be borne in mind that there is a need for immediate improvement of the economic, cultural and educational conditions of the Palestinians. This is a precondition for a viable Palestinian state whilst a realistic political agreement between the Palestinians and Israel will bring peace to the region. 🇵🇸

Egypt: Between Scylla and Charybdis!

Nicholas Voulelis,
Journalist, Athens

The author emphasizes the role of political Islam after the end of the Mubarak rule in Egypt vis-à-vis the role of the military and the potential of the liberal secular powers in the country. The struggle for real power in Egypt has just begun; the military and the Muslim Brotherhood will compete fiercely but will also negotiate until a mutually beneficial compromise is reached.

The Freedom and Justice Party of the Muslim Brotherhood proved to be the strongest power in the People's Assembly, with a percentage exceeding 40 percent, while in second place was the Al-Nour Party (The Light) of the ultra-conservative Islamists, also known as Salafists, with more than 20 percent.

Thus, the Islamists have taken over two thirds of the seats in Parliament during the first free elections held in Egypt after the revolution of January 25, 2011 and the ejection of Hosni Mubarak from the presidency.

The dominance of the Islamists seems a contradiction to the fact that the revolution mainly began with impressive protests in Tahrir Square in Cairo and other major cities, by hundreds of thousands of citizens and especially young people that were inspired by democratic, liberal or leftist beliefs and the Muslim Brotherhood only joined the protests a few days later.

This contrast is, however, superficial because the Muslim Brotherhood is the only organized party in the country - for several decades now - and is essentially a force that was incorporated in the system of power, especially in the years of Sadat and Mubarak.

The armed forces, which overturned the monarchy in 1952 and established the regime that continues to rule even today, tolerated the Islamists after they denounced armed violence and essentially conceded to them the rule of several areas of society, in addition to religion. For this reason the Muslim Brotherhood will now probably prefer a process of conciliation with the army rather than conflict.

The extreme Salafists, who are certainly more conservative and populist than the Muslim Brotherhood, with their experience in making compromises, are the more backward tendency in modern

political Islam that is generously supported by Saudi Arabia and the rich emirates of the Gulf in order to avert a rise in the influence of Shiite Iran, on the one hand, and the development of democratic, liberal and leftist forces, on the other.

The reason is simple: Egypt is the most politically and culturally important country of the Arab world and is also the cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy in the surrounding region.

The electoral triumph of the Islamists undoubtedly marks the rise of political Islam as the dominant trend wherever the dictatorships are swept away by the 'Arab Spring'. But the struggle for real power in Egypt has just begun; the military and the Muslim Brotherhood will compete fiercely but will also negotiate until a mutually beneficial compromise is reached.

The armed forces will not easily concede all power and the Muslim Brotherhood will surely come into conflict with large sections of society that do not accept several of their beliefs. At the same time, any government responsibilities they

undertake will bring the Muslim Brotherhood up against their own contradictions, since they have never presented a specific economic and social programme nor cleared up their positions on major issues.

Are they prepared, for example, to accept political pluralism and a president of the country that is a Coptic Christian or a woman? Will they respect the peace treaty with Israel? Many assure that they are moderates but only the exercise of power reveals the true intentions of those that seek it.

Egyptian society undoubtedly possesses the forces that could support an alternative solution to the Islamists but these were unable to group and ally themselves in time to achieve the best election results.

The more quickly these forces manage to organise, to acquire a broad popular base and express the true needs of all the citizens, the more quickly will the conditions arise for the permanent removal of the military from power and for proving whether the Islamists are able to offer contemporary solutions to Egypt's problems. 🇪🇬

Living in Interesting Times: Towards a New Context in Turkish–Military Relations

Pantelis Touloumakos,
University of Athens

The author interprets the main events covering the political rivalry between the ruling Islamist AKP party and the Kemalist military establishment of Turkey. It is suggested that the crisis will remain the main feature in the domestic political scene in Turkey and the situation is expected to deteriorate further.

The role of the General Staff has always been an important one in Turkish politics. During the 20th century, three military coups took place in Turkey, in 1960, 1971 and 1980. Acting as a guardian of Kemalist principles, the Turkish army took over the political power, in order to prevent activities possibly threatening the secular character or the structures of the Turkish state. In all three cases, the political power was finally handled to the politicians; in spite of this, the army maintained for itself the role of the preserver of the political order. Besides, in 1997, as a result of the great pressure put by the army, the coalition government, led by Necmettin Erbakan, resigned; in Turkey, this was seen as “the first post – modern *coup d’etat*”.

The recent information leaked to the Turkish press, referring to an alleged, secret organization called *Ergenekon*, as well as information

about the existence of alleged secret military plans to overthrow the AKP government – mainly the *Balyoz* (Sledgehammer) plan, but also the *Sarıkoz* (blonde girl), *Ayışığı* (moonlight) and *Yakamoz* (Sea Sparkle) plans – led to a vast judicial investigation. As a result of this, several hundred people were interrogated and some of them were even arrested; this expanded also in the military domain. With the arrest of the War Academics Commander, General Bilgin Balanlı, in May 2011, 29 of the approximately 300 Turkish Armed Forces’ active – duty generals were under arrest on charges of plotting to topple the government. Moreover, a few days ago, Turkish General Staff ex – Chief, retired General, İlker Başbuğ, has also been arrested, facing similar charges.

What is happening in Turkey nowadays should have been seen as extremely difficult – if not impossible – 20 years ago; the

interference of the army in Turkish politics was thought to be part and parcel of the everyday political life. It is not difficult to track down the reasons for this essential change; the unstable coalition governments of the nineties', as well as the serious crises from which Turkish economy suffered during the same period, were succeeded by a strong majority government, with a clear political and economic programme. After almost ten years in power, the ruling AKP managed to build a strong, developing economy and to implement important constitutional and political reforms. This probably set the ground for the confrontation with the "Pashas", that is, the Generals. Let us remember that the relations between the AKP and the Turkish General Staff have never been quite warm; the AKP was many times also accused for having an islamist "secret agenda".

A judicial investigation over the illegal activities of the so – called "deep state" (*derin devlet*) was thought – by many Turkish and foreign observers of the Turkish politics – to be a necessary step, in order to build a solid democracy in

Turkey. However, serious doubts about the real incentives of the investigations have been raised. The handling of investigations and specific activities of Turkish authorities enhanced the view that the real target is the military, and some of the opponents of the ruling party; concerns about the way the investigation is carried out and the judicial procedures are also to be found in the very recent EU Progress Report about Turkey, even if expressed in a much more modest way.

Regardless of its intentions, time works for the AKP; while the investigations are still going on – revealing more elements about these cases – the public image of the military is steadily declining. The reduction of the military's influence over the politics must be considered very important, in any case; it remains to be seen if this will be the only result of this crucial period. In case that the investigations serve other purposes also – except for shedding light in the activities of the "deep state" – this will probably cause new crises in Turkish politics.

Focus on *Iran*

Iran is a country posing a major political challenge for the Western interests in the Middle East. Due to its geopolitical significance Tehran exerts considerable influence in major developments around the Middle East. The Iranian nuclear programme, the Syrian and Bahrain crises, security in the Eastern Mediterranean as well as the Eurozone crisis and the energy reserves of the European South are some of the issues that make Iran a headline.

In this context, *H.E. Mehdi Honardoust, the Ambassador of I.R. Iran in Greece* an experience diplomat who served in various post in the past, including China and India, has gladly accepted to unfold Iran's geopolitical views in an interview to Evangelos Venetis (Athens, December 20, 2011).

Q: *In the last few weeks there has been an ongoing initiative by some western countries to strengthen sanctions against Iran's energy sector and banking system. Would these measures affect Iran's resolve to develop its nuclear program? What will Iran's response be?*

A: The Islamic Republic of Iran as a member of I.A.E.A is legally entitled to proceed to peacefully nuclear activities under the I.A.E.A regulations and nobody can stop the Iranian initiative. Iran has repeatedly announced its position on this issue, stressing out that the file of the Iranian nuclear programme is absolutely a technical, not political, issue, related entirely to the I.A.E.A. However some western countries have used it as a political lever in order to exert pressure on Iran and to deprive Iranian people from our legitimate and inevitable birth right. The Iranian response to this double standard and bully approach by some western countries is resistance for justice and equity in the world as usual.

Q: *What do you think of the disagreement between Lebanon and Israel over the energy deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean and how this could affect relations between Cyprus and Lebanon? In this case what could the role of Greece and Iran be?*

A: The Zionist regime (Israel) has always displayed contempt about international human rights, aiming only to fulfill its expansionist goals. In the case of the Lebanese energy resources Tel Aviv pursues the same expansionist policy. In this process we advise our Lebanese and Cypriot friends to resolve their difference by diplomatic means only and avoid any tension for the sake of stability I the region.

Q: *What is the future of British-Iranian relations in the aftermath of the interruption of bilateral diplomatic relations?*

A: Given that in the last century the British foreign policy toward Iran has

been negative and hostile, there has been growing resentment amongst Iranians about British policy. Iran is ready to consider the resumption of direct bilateral diplomatic relations provided that these are based on mutual respect.

Q: *Day by day the Syrian crisis is getting worse. How should this crisis be handled?*

A: Every crisis is distinctively different and one should not employ the same means to resolve every crisis. In Syria the intervention of foreign countries has made things more complicated. We should distinguish between unarmed peaceful protesters and armed gangs. No state can tolerate the activity of revolutionary groups which are armed by foreign powers.

Q: *What is Iran's attitude to Turkey after Ankara's decision to install a NATO radar missile system?*

A: Iran and Turkey enjoy positive relations and they have common goals and interests in the region based on mutual respect. Iran expects from all its neighbors, including Turkey, to pay attention to our concerns whenever a hostile action takes place in the region. The installation of the NATO radar system in SE Turkey is one of those actions and we expect from Ankara to take into consideration our concerns.

Q: *If there is an external military intervention in Syria, how would Tehran react?*

A: Foreign military intervention in Syria is very unlikely for now. We do not agree with such a prospect and we view this kind of intervention as the cause for all trouble in the region. Syria has a special geostrategic position and if there is an intervention in Syria, then there will be destabilization of the country with unpredictable consequences for the region.

Q: *What is the future of the Bahraini crisis?*

A: We expect that the people's right must be protected and that governments should not oppress their peoples. In the case of Bahrain, extra regional countries empowered regional ones to intervene in Bahrain and suppress demonstrations there. This kind of policy is expected to backfire. The only solution to the crisis is to hold negotiations between the government and the protesters, resulting in the equal treatment for every citizen and protection of human rights in Bahrain.

Q: *Could you comment on the US withdrawal from Iraq?*

A: We are pleased that they have withdrawn from Iraq because they have brought destruction to the country. Since 2003 there have been about one million victims in Iraq. The US did not bring stability to Iraq but has become the main cause for insecurity and division in the country, paving the way for the development of terrorism in the country. If the US totally withdraws from Iraq, then we will be glad to

contribute to the stability and prosperity of the country.

Q: *On December 1, Greece blocked Britain's bid to introduce an EU ban on Iranian oil imports to choke funds to Tehran. Could you comment on this?*

A: Relations between Iran and Greece are the deepest and oldest than any other in Europe. Unfortunately some of the European countries, which have adopted the US policy, have decided to raise their differences with Iran within the E.U. major economically Western countries avoid blaming themselves for the problems they cause. For instance with regard to the current economic crisis in Europe, they imply that Greece is a main reason for the crises in Europe and as well as in Eurozone and it means that no big western economies accept the responsibility of this economic recession. We believe that Greece's decision to continue buying Iranian oil is based on mutual interest and our recommendation to some European countries is not to link their national interest to the American's foreign policy in the region.

Q: *What is your view about the news published by western media on Iran selling crude oil to Greece on credit?*

A: Greece is one of our traditional oil customers and Iran, as a friend of Athens, never approached bilateral relations based on the economic interest but also on the overall good relations

between the two countries. In this context we have not stopped supporting and promoting our bilateral relations in spite of the current economic crisis in Greece.

Q: *How does Tehran view the Greek-Israeli rapprochement?*

A: It is absolutely clear that every country plans and exercises its foreign policy based on its national interest. Our policy is no to interfere in the decisions process of another country, but we believe the cost and losses is more than its profits in promoting relations with the notorious and occupying Zionist regime.

Q: *What is your opinion about the current status of Greek-Iranian relations? Can they gain momentum in the foreseeable future and how?*

A: Greek-Iranian relations have always been positive in modern times and they are based on the long historical past of the two civilizations. Greece is a country of particular importance for Iran because of its geostrategic position and its membership in important international bodies, including the EU. Thus we hope that with the collaboration of the two countries we will be able to promote bilateral relations further in the foreseeable future. 🇮🇷

Monitoring the Middle East

A selection of news and comments on major developments in the region aims to inform the reader about the evolution of recent events and enable him to comprehend the sequence of actions and intentions of the protagonists in the Middle East. The citation of the news by country aims to cover the region and reveal the interaction of events in each country in a region which is characterized by cultural unity rather than diversity. Additionally this section includes news in regions neighboring the Middle East, such as the Eastern Mediterranean, North and East Africa, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Last the comments following the news aim to supplement the news in a non-biased manner.

Bahrain

Legislation to criminalize torture in Bahrain (15 January, 2012)

The cabinet in Bahrain has approved two laws of the Penal Code to implement its zero-tolerance policy towards torture. The first amendment aims to protect persons who claim to be tortured and the second ensures these complaints are quickly investigated and prosecuted by the attorney-general, and not the police.

Comment: This is a first step toward the liberalization of the political and social system of the country. More actions must be taken to meet the demands of the protesters in the Shiite uprising.

Cyprus

Rauf Denktash dies (13 January 2012)

Rauf Denktash, the former leader of the Turkish Cypriot minority whose determined pursuit of a separate state for his people and strong opposition to the divided island's reunification defined a political career spanning six decades, has died at the age of 87.

Comment: Finding a solution to the Cyprus problem is a time-consuming process.

Official visit of the Greek Cypriot Defense Minister to Israel (7 January 2012)

Defense Minister of Cyprus Demetres Eliades visited officially Israel at the invitation of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense of Israel Ehud Barak for negotiations on issues of mutual concern related to defense and intelligence issues.

Comment: The Greek Cypriot-Israeli rapprochement gains momentum.

Egypt

Islamists win final parliamentary vote (7 January, 2012)

The two main Islamic parties in Egypt have announced winning over 60 percent of the vote in the final stage of the parliamentary elections. The *Freedom and Justice Party* of the *Muslim Brotherhood* stated on Saturday that it had garnered 35.2 percent of the party list vote. The *al-Nur* party also claimed it received 27 percent.

Comment: In the short term collaboration between the Egyptian military and the Islamists is a desideratum.

Prosecution seeks death penalty for Mubarak (5 January, 2012)

Prosecutors have called on the court hearing the case of former Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak to hang him for the murder of protesters during the revolution that deposed him nearly a year ago.

Greece

UAE-Greece joint committee meeting begins (12 January, 2012)

UAE Foreign Minister H.H. Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan and his Greek counterpart Stavros Dimas today opened the first meeting of the UAE-Greece Joint Committee. The UAE foreign minister and his delegation came to Athens to attend a Greek-Arab business forum with the participation of business people and political figures from both states.

Comment: This time another opportunity for Arab investments must not be missed.

Iran

EU imposes Iranian oil imports ban (23 January, 2012)

European foreign ministers set to approve oil embargo which is to take effect on July 1. Iran has underscored the significance of such a move whilst Israel has hailed the decision.

Iran stores more oil at sea under increasing trade pressure (11 January, 2012)

The volume of Iranian crude oil stored at sea has risen to as much as 8 million barrels and is likely to increase further as the Islamic Republic struggles with sanctions and a seasonal refinery slowdown, shipping sources say. Iran, OPEC's second-largest oil producer after Saudi Arabia with output of about 3.5 million barrels per day, faces tougher trade hurdles over its nuclear programme.

Comment: Increasing economic sanctions against Iran could lead to non-economic escalation in the region.

Iraq

Baghdad issues arrest warrant for Hashemi (19 December, 2012)

Iraq's judiciary has issued an arrest warrant for Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi over his involvement in the assassination of Iraqi officials. The warrant was issued under anti-terror laws.

US military mission in Iraq over (18 December, 2012)

The US says it has completed its mission in Iraq as American military vehicles and trucks crossed Iraq's southern border into Kuwait. The US troops left Iraq at daybreak on Sunday and will reportedly stay at one of the US military bases in Kuwait before departing the Persian Gulf state for the United States.

Comment: The political balance in Iraq is fragile and will remain unstable after the US military withdrawal from the country.

Kuwait

Kuwaiti banking sector performs well (15 January, 2012)

The performance of both Kuwaiti banking sector was positive in 2011. According to a report by Global Investment House, the Kuwaiti banking sector exceeded the benchmark index in 2011.

Morocco

Moroccans protests for more reforms (7 January, 2012)

People in Morocco have once again taken to streets in several cities across the North African country, protesting the government's policies and calling for more reforms, urging the administration to create more jobs and take decisive action against corruption. They also complain about high food prices and state ownership of major institutions.

Oman

Oman to increase spending in 2011-2015 (9 January 2012)

Oman plans to boost budget spending by 26% in its five-year plan, which ends in 2015, to create jobs and improve living standards in the Gulf Arab oil exporter, its finance minister said yesterday. The sultanate has planned to spend 43bn rials (\$ 112bn) over five years. However, Finance Minister Darwish al-Balushi told Reuters that the government has now decided to increase the planned amount to 54bn rials to cover "additional obligations."

Palestine - Israel

Hamas leader in Egypt (6 January 2012)

Prominent Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal is in Egypt to hold talks with Egyptian and Arab League (AL) officials on Palestinian reconciliation efforts.

Comment: It is interesting to see how Meshaal will balance between Syria and Egypt from now on. One way or another he attempts to increase his sources of support.

Qatar

Qatar plans expansion of petrochemical industry (9 January 2012)

In a boost for Qatar's petrochemical industry, the country will become a key global producer of low-density polyethylene with the inauguration of LDPE-3 at Mesaieed in the first half of this year. LDPE-3, which is being set up by Qatar Petrochemical Company (Qapco), will have a low-density polyethylene capacity of 300,000 tones-per-year (tpy).

Comment: An interesting development, especially when the Iranian petrochemical industry is under increasing western sanctions.

Saudi Arabia

The Saudi oil output and Iran sanctions (16 January, 2012)

Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources Ali Al-Naimi said Sunday that his country's plans to increase oil output is not linked to sanctions that could affect Iran's oil exports. Al-Naimi was quoted by Al-Eqtisadiyah daily as saying the Kingdom was ready to use its spare production capacity to fill any market need. But he said earlier pledges to boost output as needed were not linked to global worries over US and potential European Union sanctions affecting Iranian oil exports.

Comment: Saudi Arabia is expected to play a major role in replacing Iranian oil output in the forthcoming months.

Syria

Syria vacates consulate in SE Turkey (2 January, 2012)

Syrian government has evacuated its consulate general in the southeastern Turkish city of Gaziantep near the Syria-Turkey border. Turkish Foreign Ministry did not issue any comment about evacuation of the Syrian consulate on Monday, but said that Turkey's diplomatic missions in Syria were fully operational.

Comment: Is this a prelude to a further deterioration of Turkish-Syrian diplomatic ties?

Turkey

NATO radar system installed in Turkey (17 January, 2012)

An early warning radar station, part of NATO's missile defense system, has become operational in eastern Turkey. The radar system was mounted on vehicles as a mobile system in a military base in the Kurecik area in the eastern province of Malatya on Monday, and will be fixed later as a stationary system in the base.

Top general jailed in Turkey (6 January 2012)

A Turkish court approves of the prosecution's request for imprisonment pending trial of Ilker Basbug, the former head of the country's Armed Forces, who is charged with 'gang leadership' and alleged conspiring to topple the government.

Comment: The Islamization of Turkey's politics is underway.

United Arab Emirates

UAE, a global hub for Green Economy (16 January 2012)

A long-term national initiative to build green economy in the UAE under the slogan "A green economy for sustainable development" was launched on Sunday by His Highness Shaikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai.

Yemen

Al-Qaeda seizes town in S. Yemen (16 January 2012)

Al Qaeda militants have seized a small town southeast of Yemen's capital Sanaa yesterday in another setback to efforts to restore order after President Ali Abdullah Saleh formally handed over power following almost a year of mass protests against his rule. A police source and witnesses said the militants met little resistance from a small police force when they entered the town of Radda in Al Baydah province, 170km from Sanaa, on Saturday night, seizing an ancient citadel and mosque.

Yemeni demonstrators demand Saleh's trial (7 January, 2012)

People in Yemen have once again held anti-regime protests in major cities calling for the trial of outgoing dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh. Demonstrators have been calling for Saleh's trial for his role in the killing of hundreds of protesters during the popular uprising that began in late January 2011.