

Islamic Awakening or Pro-Democracy Movement: How Tehran and Washington Framed the Egyptian Uprising

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Abstract

As influential players in the Middle East's regional politics, both American and Iranian officials are trying to define and interpret the wave of Arab revolutions in a way that resonates with their own political narratives. In other words, they want to frame the situation in a way that matches their respective ideologies, which, in turn, would best suit their political interests. I use framing theory to illustrate the frameworks through which top American and Iranian leaders try to portray those regional changes, especially in Egypt. For this purpose, framing theory and its applications will be discussed first. Then, the views of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Barack Obama regarding the regional revolts will be analyzed.

Based on Robert Entman's four-element formulation of framing, each side's framing is demonstrated through its projection of (1) problem definition, (2) causal interpretation, (3) moral evaluation, and (4) solution/treatment recommendation. The analysis shows how the two sides frame a single phenomenon in extremely different ways: one portrays it as a sign of Islamic awakening against the decades-old rule of western-backed dictators, whereas the other frames it as a pro-democracy movement heralding the emergence of new democratic states. The paper concludes by arguing

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that the dominance of each government's frames will pave the way for it to claim the uprisings within its own narrative and thus influence the situation on the ground in their desired way.

Introduction

In response to a question about the role of Iran in the Arab uprisings, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said: "I think that everyone is aware of their efforts to exploit and even hijack what are legitimate protests," efforts that she hoped in this "era of instant communication" will not fool the people of the region.¹ Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, on the other hand, stated in a speech that "all the efforts of arrogant powers [the West] are aimed at dominating the regional changes ... the future of this [uprising] is in the interests of [the] people of the region, but they should be utterly warned and watchful because the enemy ... tries to distort this move."² Why do both sides accuse each other of trying to derail or hijack these uprisings?

As influential players in the Middle East's regional politics, it seems that officials in both countries are trying to define and interpret the wave of Arab uprisings (particularly the Egyptian one) in a way that resonates with their own political narratives. In other words, they want to frame the situation in a way that matches their respective ideologies, which, in turn, would best suit their own political interests. Thus, whatever the situation on the ground and the roots, demands, and aspirations of the upheavals, they try to frame their narratives based on their own ideological and political preferences. In this paper, framing theory will be used to illustrate the frameworks through which top American and Iranian leaders try to portray those regional changes, especially in Egypt. For this purpose, framing theory and its applications will be discussed first. Accordingly, then, the views of Khamenei and Obama will be analyzed. The paper concludes by arguing that the dominance of each government's frames will pave the way for them to claim the uprisings within their own narratives and thus influence the situation on the ground in their desired ways.

Egypt as a Ground for Tehran-Washington Regional Rivalry

Ever since the early days of the modern Middle East, Egypt has been a crucial player and regional heavy-weight. Apart from such quantitative measures as its size and population, a couple of factors turned Egypt into a key regional player. First of all, with its centuries-old al-Azhar University and other critical intellectual-religious institutions, Egypt has historically been one of the most

important bedrocks for the flourishing and export of Islamic political thought. In fact, it was Egypt that introduced the fathers of “political Islam”: the earliest products of the encounter between Islamic intellectuals and western modernity were Muhammad Abduh, Hasan al-Banna, and Sayyid Qutb. This has made Egypt a regional source of Islamic intellectual thought and inspiration.

In terms of its strategic role with regard to the regional balance of power, Egypt has also been a very essential element. It sits next to the strategic Suez Canal and is one of Israel’s neighbors. In fact, Egypt has been the central Arab player in the historic struggle between the Arab countries and Israel over Palestine’s destiny. Even today, it continues to assure cross-border stability and uphold the peace treaty with Israel. Thus, apart from its political-intellectual importance, Egypt has also played a very concrete geostrategic role in maintaining regional stability with its neighbors.

This illustrates the importance of the Egyptian uprising as a site for American-Iranian regional rivalry: It has both the symbolic importance and the regional geostrategic role. In fact, Egypt could be considered the place in which the trajectory of the Arab uprisings might determine the future of the two competing regional narratives (and forces): that of the United States and its ideals of liberal democracy for the Middle East on one hand, and that of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its model of Islamic awakening and rule on the other.

Framing Theory

Framing has become a popular approach for analyzing political communication. According to David A. Snow et al., “the frame concept was introduced into the social sciences by Gregory Bateson in 1955 and elaborated nearly 20 years later by Erving Goffman in *Frame Analysis*.” In the mid-1980s, they write, “it formed the cornerstone for a framing perspective on social movements... and was found to be of conceptual utility in research on political communication.”²³ In terms of political communication, Dietram A. Scheufele and David Tewksbury emphasize the significance of framing by deeming it “based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences.”²⁴

Many theorists have tried to define the concept of framing in the field of political communication. Robert Entman’s definition, one of the most widely cited conceptualizations of the term, states that “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.”²⁵ Here, he enumerates four specific aspects: (1) how the problem

is defined, (2) its causes, (3) moral aspects (agents of good/evil), and (4) the solution that shows how the problem could be solved. Entman also adds that once a frame is naturalized as an objective rendering of events, it “can impose perceptual boundaries around a problem and impact how it is defined, understood, evaluated, and resolved.”⁶ This shows the importance of framing: ultimately, it can determine how one deals with an issue.

According to William A. Gamson et al. (1992), the chosen “frame [plays the role of] a central organizing principle that holds together and gives coherence and meaning to a diverse array of symbols.” Thus, the formulation of frames, especially with regard to issues that have multiple sides and are controversial, plays a critical role in how the issue is going to be understood by different audiences: It puts together various elements in a way that makes them meaningful, of course in the frame-maker’s desired way. They also note that media frames “organize the world both for journalists who report it and, in some important degree, for [those of] us who rely on their reports.”⁷ Thus, audiences also play their role in the representation and understanding of events by using their frames of perception.

Similarly, Scheufele and Tewksbury conceptualize framing as operating on two levels: both as a macro-construct and a micro-construct. As a macro-construct, they write, “the term ‘framing’ refers to modes of presentation that journalists and other communicators use to present information in a way that resonates with existing underlying schemas among their audience.” As a micro-construct, “framing describes how people use information and presentation features regarding issues as they form impressions.”⁸ Therefore, frames of representation could be discussed on both levels: While “senders” try to represent the issues in their desired frames, “receivers” make sense of the issues in terms of their own frames of understanding.

Gamson et al. make another interesting point about frame contestation: When different actors try to represent the same issue in terms of different frames, a contestation of frames happens. More particularly, they see the media as a dependent variable: different frames compete for dominance across a range of media outlets. They cite Michael Gurevitch and Mark R. Levy as saying that media become a “site on which various social groups, institutions, and ideologies struggle over the definition and construction of social reality.” As media outlets construct the reality through their framing, they “provide a series of arenas in which symbolic contests are carried out among competing sponsors of meaning.”⁹

This relates to the central question of this paper: How do rival powers compete over defining a particular social reality? This contest is actually carried out internationally – among state actors. The contest’s arena, in that case, could

be a range of national, regional, and international media outlets. The scope of this paper, however, is limited to official communication of American and Iranian leaders in terms of how they tried to frame the 2011 Egyptian uprising.

Many researchers have analyzed the official framing of controversial issues. J. Lim and H. Seo, for example, studied Washington's framing of North Korea. Furthermore, they looked into the effects of such frames on news media framing and, then, the American public's perception of North Korea. For the first part, which is similar to this paper, they analyzed Washington's policy statements regarding that country in a certain time frame during 2002. They found that Washington had constructed three major competing frames. With different degrees of prominence at different times, North Korea was framed as a military threat, a human rights (abuse) case, and a dialogue partner. They concluded that those government frames are in direct interaction with media frames and that those two, together, influence the public's understanding of that country.¹⁰

Another interesting study looked into the differences between the framings of the first Gulf War and the Bosnian War by the western powers. It analyzed the frames used by the American, British, and French leaders to portray those two wars and illustrated how the differences between these two frames served their own interests and policies. Interestingly, Riikka Kuusisto found that western leaders used totally different frames to define them, frames that legitimized the policy of western military intervention in the first Gulf War and, by contrast, non-action with regard to the Bosnian War.¹¹

Christian Spielvogel, in another project, studied the frames through which candidates of the 2004 American presidential elections presented their arguments regarding the Iraq War and the American "war on terror" in general. Looking into their campaign ads, speeches, and public addresses, he concluded that both Republican and Democratic candidates presented their arguments in a broad moral frame: They tried to frame the conflict in terms of the struggle between good and evil.¹²

Working on an earlier time span, Sue Lockett John et al. discussed how George W. Bush tried to distribute and redistribute a few recurring security-related discourses in the summer and autumn of 2002. Analyzing recurring frames within different forms of the administration's public communications, they argued that Bush "extended the sense of national crisis from September 11 to Saddam and Iraq."¹³ More specifically, they discerned that the major discourses of internal homeland security and the external "war on terror" played a significant role in his administration's efforts to keep the nation in a state of crisis. Interestingly, they found that the issues of Saddam and Iraq were subtly inserted into the same frames in order to connect Saddam's actions

with American security. Not unlike other researchers, they found that news coverage often follows the administration's framing of the issues.

Method

In this paper, a framing analysis of both the Iranian and American leaders' remarks regarding the 2011 Egyptian uprising is offered. This is based on the fact that their remarks can illustrate the highest-ranking, broad formulation of official perspective on each side. All of Obama's remarks have been retrieved from his official website: whitehouse.gov. These remarks, which extend from the beginning of Egyptians' protests in Tahrir Square in late January 2011 to early April 2011, range from speeches and press conferences to official meetings and joint conferences with other heads of state. All of Khamenei's remarks made during the same period have been accessed through his official website: Khamenei.ir. These mostly consist of his public addresses delivered to various audiences. The speeches are originally in Persian (Farsi). For direct quoting, I have used the English translation of his speech transcripts that are available through his website.

As quoted from Entman above, four major questions should be asked when doing frame analysis: (1) the definition of the situation, (2) the underlying causes that have brought it about, (3) a moral judgment about the good and evil forces involved and, finally, (4) the recommended solutions. Based on this model, I have analyzed the remarks of both leaders. After analyzing their definition of the issue and its causes, I discuss their description of the good and evil forces and their proposed solutions. This approach allows me to analyze the frames they are using to interpret the Egyptian uprising.

Iranian Frames

Analyzing Iran's official framing of the Egyptian (and other Arab) uprisings, one first notes how the Iranian leader names the whole issue: Islamic awakening. In fact, Iran sees Egypt (along with Tunisia) as one of the first examples of the Islamic awakening that began to emerge throughout the region in early 2011. At various points, Khamenei describes these uprisings as signs of an Islamic awakening: that people have risen based on Islamic teachings and with the goal of promoting Islam.¹⁴ At one point, he enumerates two major characteristics: (1) these events are truly popular uprisings, for ordinary people of all social strata have participated in them, and (2) their demands and goals are Islamic. Even the organizing institutions and slogans, Khamenei believes, are based on Islam: People start their protests from mosques after Friday prayers and chant "Allahu Akbar" (Allah is the Greatest).¹⁵

This shows that the very first image the Iranians are trying to portray is based on their view of the desired role of Islam in regional politics. In other words, as Iran's own popular revolution of 1979 and the constitution of the subsequent Islamic Republic draws heavily on Islam as a source of legislation, Iran's official framing of events in Egypt also draws heavily on Islamic elements in order to portray them as having an Islamic identity. Here, Khamenei is apparently trying to paint a future Egypt that identifies, and thus collaborates, with the Islamic Republic.

The second aspect of framing deals with designated causes: How does Iran's official framing explain the uprising's causes? The first and foremost response is humiliation. Khamenei frequently opines that the great people of Egypt rose because they were humiliated; and the reason for humiliation is that, under Hosni Mubarak, they had lost their vanguard role in the Muslim world as a pioneering nation for the cause of Islam (e.g., their role in helping the Palestinians). According to him, the Mubarak regime had turned this great nation into an ultimately passive force in the face of Israeli aggression, even cooperating with Israel in suppressing the Palestinians: "A country whose flag of anti-Zionism used to inspire the entire Arab world one day was trapped in such a situation that the Israelis... started to rely on Mubarak's assistance in all their activities against the Palestinians."¹⁶

Also, Mubarak had made Egypt completely subservient to western interests and closed all potential channels through which Egyptians could voice their protest over such issues. All those trends, according to Khamenei, led to an accumulating humiliation that diminished their dignity: "The people of Egypt feel humiliated because the current Egyptian regime supports Israel and blindly obeys America. This is the main cause of the movement."¹⁷

Iran's official account also gives heavy weight to anti-Israeli and anti-American sentiments, which it deems to be among the major forces driving the uprisings. In Iran's view, while the decades-old Mubarak-like dictatorships are acutely criticized and rejected, their first and foremost crime is their total reliance and dependence upon Washington as well as their alliance with Tel Aviv. In other words, they are criminal mostly because they have obeyed American and Israeli orders. Other Egyptian grievances, such as protesting the Mubarak regime's deep and vast corruption or their own daunting economic situation, are recognized as secondary issues. Thus, according to Khamenei, Islamic and anti-Israeli/anti-American sentiments, which are based on the nation's search for recovering its independence, dignity, and self-esteem, are the major causes of their revolt: "The primary purpose of these movements is to oppose the hegemony of the arrogant powers over this region. It is the hegemony of the arrogant powers that has humiliated the nations of the region."¹⁸

This helps us understand how Iran sees its own role played out in Egypt. In fact, that is part of the moral evaluation of Iran's official framing as portraying the forces of good and evil. Not surprisingly, Iranians see the whole wave of Arab uprisings inspired by their own 1979 Islamic revolution. Accordingly, the Arab masses have been watching their own corrupt, West-dependent rulers over the past thirty years and comparing their rulers, along with their own socioeconomic situation, with those of the Iranians. Apart from the Islamic Republic's recent political gains within the region and its dynamic domestic political atmosphere, the Iranian leader opines, the Arab masses have witnessed Iranian breakthroughs on multiple economic and scientific fronts, including that of space and nuclear power, which, cumulatively, have caused them to become increasingly frustrated with their own incapable, repressive, and corrupt governments. If one adds the powerful element of Islamic religious-cultural proximity, they will see the Islamic Republic's strong appeal to other Muslims.¹⁹ This is how Iran projects its impact on regional public opinion.

In fact, one of Iran's ambitious goals from its early years has been to inspire other Muslim nations and achieve the status of a model state for them to emulate. The recent wave of Arab uprisings, not to mention their success in toppling dictators in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere, has reinforced such talk within Tehran's official discourse. Although in the early days of the uprisings it seemed that the networked activism of a new generation of media-savvy youths was the revolution's engine, Iranians still claimed credit for inspiring Egyptians. In short, Tehran sees its historic role in regionally distributing such discourses as central to its foreign policy.

The American-Israeli axis, obviously, is the major force of evil within this ideological narrative. Based on the Iranian perspective, the United States and Israel were close allies of the former dictators and thus were jointly responsible for their crimes. Moreover, as the Iranian leader points out frequently, both countries were very surprised by the protest movements. In fact, those movements caused Israel and the United States to become very concerned and worried about their own long-term interests, which were tied up with those of the former dictators.²⁰ Why, then, did Obama ask Mubarak to step down? According to Khamenei, this was a deceptive policy designed to suggest that Washington supported the Egyptians' political aspirations so that they would forget the American-Israeli role in their close collaboration with the old regimes. Thus, they sought to quell people's legitimate sentiments: "They supported Hosni Mubarak as long as they could. Then they realized that it was not possible to keep him in power, so they threw him away... The plot was to deceive the people. They expressed their support for the people and at the same time they tried to put their own supporters in positions of power."²¹

Iran's official perspective portrays the Arab Spring uprisings as clear signs of the West's (especially American) declining influence in regional politics. Although surprised by the people's uprising, Washington still tried to, hypocritically, side with them so that it would not lose its control and influence over the process of change. According to Khamenei, they are trying to steal the people's movement through cosmetic reforms implemented by the forces of the same old regime, essentially maintaining the old order: "[T]hey tried to hijack these revolutions ... they claim to support nations. [but] They are hypocritical about Egypt..."²² Moreover, Washington wants to cover up the people's anti-Israeli/anti-American demands so it can preserve its influence in the new system too. Finally, with regard to Iran, Washington attempts to place the Arab uprisings into the Iranian context to suggest that similar moves are taking place within Iran. These are the lines along which Tehran frames Washington's role as an evil force in international affairs.²³

In terms of solutions, the above-mentioned frames should have made it clear that Khamenei's major recommendation for achieving victory is to reject western influence. In other words, the most important danger threatening the Egyptian people's revolution, in Tehran's view, is the prospect of western powers retaining their old grip within the new order. In order for their uprising to succeed, therefore, the Egyptians should watch the process of change very closely and consent to no less than full independence from external powers, especially the United States and Israel.

Given the major elements of Tehran's framing efforts outlined above, American policies in the region clearly play an indispensable role in how the wave of change is framed. Washington, on the other hand, sees Iranian influence as a major obstacle to furthering democracy, and thus its interests in the region. An analysis of Washington's framing of the same events further illuminates this regional rivalry, at least on the rhetorical level.

American Frames

From the official American point of view, the Egyptian uprising is defined as a pro-democracy movement. Egyptians took to the streets to demand their universal rights of free speech and free assembly, which the Mubarak regime had denied. From the very early days of street protests, therefore, Obama asked Cairo to recognize those rights and start a process of meaningful dialogue with them: "[T]he process must include a broad spectrum of Egyptian voices and opposition parties."²⁴ In fact, at different points throughout the protests he tried to frame the movement as one for the cause of freedom, democracy, and liberation. He even used the name of central location of the protests, Tahrir Square,

to interpret the uprising as being geared toward *liberation* (the literal meaning of *tahrīr*),²⁵ and stressed democracy, freedom, and similar code words that could define the situation in line with American values.

Then, what were the causes of this democracy movement? There are several clear-cut responses to this question in Obama's framing. First of all, as is obvious for a democracy movement, the Egyptian people were longing for free and fair elections that would lead to a more responsive government. This was one of the major reasons. In addition, they wanted a better life. Thus a better economy, more opportunities, and a higher standard of life comprised the second reason.²⁶ From the very first days of the protests, Washington's official perspective cited poverty and state repression, both of which continued to resurface. In other words, Obama framed the situation in a fashion that managed to dismiss the idea of western (or American) guilt associated with their former ally Mubarak (a counter-frame that recurs very frequently on the Iranian side). In fact, Obama later stated during a press conference that he managed to formulate his remarks in a way that helped prevent major anti-American or anti-Israeli sentiments during the protests.²⁷

In portraying the uprising as a movement for democracy, Obama brings up different examples of peaceful protest and democratization to frame it in his desired way. At one point he talks about the "echoes of history" from tearing down of the Berlin Wall and Indonesian student protests to Gandhi's peaceful anti-colonialism.²⁸ At another point he mentions Eastern Europe's peaceful transition to democracy.²⁹ These instances help him frame the current Egyptian situation in light of, and parallel to, historic events in which peaceful protesters longed for the ideals of freedom and democracy. Not only does this approach define the Egyptian situation as similar to those examples, but it also gives important clues about Washington's role and its ultimate solutions for a fruitful, successful outcome, which would naturally be a democracy.

In terms of moral evaluation, because the whole situation is in line with essential American values of freedom and democracy, the United States is an obvious and natural ally. In other words, since the Egyptians long to achieve these American ideals, Washington is naturally a force for good that can help them realize their demands. Obama states explicitly that the United States has been and will remain a "friend and partner to Egypt," standing ready to "provide whatever assistance is necessary – and asked for – to pursue a credible transition to democracy."³⁰ In another instance, he opines that the country "must stand alongside those who believe in the same core principles..."³¹ It should be noted, however, that almost in every speech Obama emphasizes that the Egyptians must determine what they want and how they want to pursue it, apparently in an attempt to dismiss charges of American interference.

Not surprisingly, Washington's official framing deems Iran as the main evil force about which the region's people should be warned. Portraying it as a state that suppresses its citizens, Obama frames the Iranian example as an anti-thesis to democracy and freedom. He even says that Tehran "pretends" to celebrate the Egyptian people's achievements although it did not let its own people achieve their goals. He also says that Washington has told its allies in the region that "let's look at Egypt's example as opposed to Iran's example,"³² implying again that the latter example is the anti-thesis to a successful pro-democracy movement. This rhetorical move, interestingly, is the exact opposite of Tehran's efforts to frame itself as the example and thus the inspirer of regional movements geared toward an Islamic awakening. Such rhetorical moves on Obama's part seem tuned to counter such claims.

Finally, as Obama's examples of Eastern Europe's transition show, the ultimate solution from the official American perspective is a peaceful transition to democracy that will allow those countries affected to remain allies of the United States and counter Iran's further influence within the region. According to him, "a democratic Egypt can advance its role of responsible leadership not only in the region but around the world."³³ This is the best role that Washington can see for Egypt: "[I]f Egypt can make a transition from an autocratic regime to a democracy ... they become models for a peaceful transition ... that may be adopted by other countries in the region."³⁴ This shows how Washington foresees Egypt as role model, as an opposite to that of Iran.

Apart from a peaceful transition to democracy, this official American framing also emphasizes the importance of economic growth, job creation, and economic opportunities. In fact, given that Washington sees the younger generation's frustration in the face of horrible economic conditions as a major cause for the uprisings, its solution naturally includes a solution to that problem. In Egypt, says Obama, "not only do we need to be nurturing democracy, but we also have to make sure that economic opportunity is growing."³⁵ This should make sure that such frustrations will not erupt again.

Conclusion

Along with the actual geopolitical rivalry going on throughout the Middle East between Tehran and Washington over regional influence and power, there is another less tangible, although no less important, war: how to define and interpret the contemporary trends occurring in the region. This could be called a "war of narratives," one that could easily be seen in the case of Arab uprisings, as each side tries to interpret the course of events in a way designed to

favor its own positions and policies. Parallel to the very real on-the-ground rivalries on multiple fronts within the region, this other war is in critical interaction with that rivalry. This “war of narratives” is both influencing and being influenced by that actual rivalry and can have important implications for both countries’ regional struggle for influence. Since crucial parts of this geopolitical rivalry depend on the outcome of their ongoing battle “for the hearts and minds” of the region’s people, the more each side can promote its own framing of the current events in the eyes of the Middle Easterners, the more critical leverage each one can gain. And, as we see in the case of Egypt, this rhetorical battle is very acute.

Tehran’s most important argument in its attempt to frame the Egyptian uprising is to depict the United States and Israel as close allies of Mubarak and thus as partners in his crimes. In fact, at each and every point Khamenei emphasizes the humiliation inflicted by Washington as being the root of the problems from which the Egyptian people have been suffering under Mubarak and warns that Washington should not play a similar role in the process of change and within the new government. If it were to do so, Washington would steal the revolution by implementing cosmetic reforms while keeping the same old structures in order to continue advancing its own interests. Iranians, on the other hand, frame themselves as the pioneer of the region’s Islamic awakening through their 1979 revolution. This framing deems the wave of Arab uprisings as having been inspired by the example of its own Islamic revolution and subsequent achievements. Thus, Tehran sees these popular uprisings as signs of Washington’s declining influence.

Not surprisingly, Washington frames the currents in the absolute opposite way. First of all, it tries to portray the Iranian government as a repressive one that is *the* anti-thesis to democracy and prosperity. In fact, Obama frequently suggests that Iran is the counter-example of democracy and freedom while Egypt is a true example of a successful democratic movement. Thus, first and foremost, Iran should be deemed as being ruled by a repressive regime that suppresses its own citizens and denies them their natural freedoms. The United States, on the contrary, is the force of good for democracy and freedom in the region and always supports the people’s rights. In addition, it helps facilitate the nations’ path toward economic prosperity. Therefore, a bright new role is formulated for Washington in the future of Egyptian politics. The critical question that remains to be answered is which side’s framing will resonate with the historic experience and collective memory of the region’s people and find its way into their hearts and minds. This will, in turn, affect the future course of events in a critical fashion.

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