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The beginning of a new struggle

EGYPT IN CRISIS

By Syed Saleem Shahzad
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ISLAMABAD - The 30 years of now stepped-down president Hosni Mubarak's rule ended with a 56-word statement that was read on Friday by Mubarak's deputy, former intelligence chief Omar Sulieman. Mubarak's end gives new life to the previously dormant Muslim Brotherhood, but it doesn't amount to regime change. Mubarak's legacy is likely to go on, as happened in [Tunisia](#) earlier.

Suleiman delivered the following statement: "In the name of God the merciful, the compassionate, citizens, during these very difficult circumstances [Egypt](#) is going through, President Hosni Mubarak has decided to step down from the office of president of the republic and has charged the high council of the armed forces to administer the affairs of the country. May God help everybody."

Suleiman's statement is an indication that the military has carried out a coup led by Defense Minister Field Marshal Mohammed Hussein Tantawi after more than two weeks of street protests.

The end of the long rule of Mubarak, 83, has broken the stupor of the collective intellect in the Muslim world and there is a new realization that mass mobilization is a decisive power, yet in the absence of true democratic movements, the [Middle East](#) is likely to be the new playing field between Shi'ite Iran and the pre-dominantly Sunni Muslim Brotherhood.

However, Iran understands that this is a transitory stage in which any paradigm change - like the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 that ousted the shah - is a distant dream, rather it will dilute the firm grip and role of the predominantly Sunni regimes such as [Saudi Arabia](#), Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia.

This will further aggravate the Arab street, and could help the rise of Shi'ite Islam in the Middle East, thereby creating strategic depth for Iran and possibly lead to a revival of the Fatimid caliphate, which was centered in Tunisia and Egypt from 909 to 1171.

With the fall of Mubarak's regime imminent, and the political mobilization on the Arab street unabated, for the first time in seven months Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei delivered the Friday sermon in Tehran on February 4.

"This is what was always talked about as the occurrence of an Islamic awakening at the time of the Islamic revolution of the great Iranian nation [in 1979], and it is showing itself today," he said.

"Our revolution has been inspiring and a model because of perseverance, stability and its insistence on principles," Khamenei said.

"Today in Egypt one can hear your voice echoing. The American president [Jimmy Carter] who was in power during the [Iranian] revolution said in an interview that what you hear in Egypt is familiar. What is heard in [Cairo](#) today was heard in Tehran during his days," said Khamenei. He also said the recent developments in North [Africa](#) were the result of an "Islamic awakening which followed the great Islamic revolution of the Iranian nation".

Muslim Brotherhood leader Kamal al-Halbawi hailed Khamenei's statement in an interview to the BBC's Persian Service and said he wanted his country to develop in all spheres like Iran, achieving more technological and scientific advances and becoming a regional power.

Jim Lobe of Inter Press Service writes:

Widely considered the best organized and most disciplined political grouping in Egypt, the Brotherhood, whose popularity is credited to its network of social and medical services for poorer sectors in the society, as well as its longstanding opposition to and persecution by the Mubarak regime, is believed to hold the loyalty of as much of 30% of the population.

In the 2005 parliamentary election, candidates associated with the Brotherhood - the party itself has been officially banned since 1954 - won 20% of the seats in the Egyptian parliament. They received only negligible support in last November's elections which, according to local and international observers, was blatantly rigged in favor of the ruling National Democratic Party whose future is now considered very uncertain.

The Muslim Brotherhood and its ideology were deeply rooted in the struggle of the redominately Shi'ite Islamists of Iran in the mid-1960s to 1970s, which is reflective in the writings of slain Dr Ali Shariati, the ideologue of Iran's Islamic revolution who frequently quoted Syed Qutb of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

After the Islamic revolution, Iran became the main rallying force behind Islamist forces in the world. Al-Qaeda deputy Dr Ayman al-Zawahiri's Islamic jihad-linked Khalid Islambouli assassinated Egyptian president Anwar Sadat in 1981. The Iranian government in response to Sadat's peace treaty with [Israel](#), and his provision of asylum to the deposed shah of Iran, severed relations with Egypt - a street in Tehran was even named after Islambouli in honor of his actions. Following Islambouli's execution, Iran's then-supreme leader, Ruhollah Khomeini, declared him a martyr. Iran also provided asylum to family members of Islambouli.

In the meantime, throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, the worst years of suppression by the Egyptian regime against the Muslim Brotherhood, Iran was the second home of many Muslim Brotherhood leaders. After the attacks on the [United States](#) in September 11, 2001, Iran provided sanctuaries to top al-Qaeda leaders. (See [How Iran and al-Qaeda made a deal](#) Asia Times Online, April 30, 2010, and [Broadside fired at al-Qaeda leaders](#) Asia Times Online December 10, 2010.)

Iran remained the biggest supporter of the two main Muslim Brotherhood organizations in Palestine - Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

For Islamic movements, their support of the revolution in Iran and Iranian support of predominantly Sunni-Salafi organizations was something of an "historic comprise".

The Saudi Arabia-backed Muslim Brotherhood supported the revolution in a bid to end the shah's pure Shi'ite dynasty, which was deeply blended into a parochial bias against Arabs and Turks and the continuation of the Safavid empire whose forerunners converted to Shi'ite Islam in 1501 to create an excuse for not accepting Ottoman Turks as part of the caliphate. An ideologue of the Iranian revolution, Dr Ali Shariati, therefore called Safavid and the shah's Shi'ism as "Black Shi'ism" blended with bias and un-Islamic traits.

The Muslim Brotherhood therefore reposed a lot of hope in Shariati's "Red Shi'ism" that has its roots in the Koran and the Prophet Mohammad's life and the life of Mohammad's descendants (*Bani Fatima*). Therefore, it was held that the Islamic revolution of Iran would be a friend of Arab nations. Nonetheless, it was a strategic alliance by both Shi'ite and Sunni Islamists for their mutual benefit. Shi'ite Islamists also envisaged the enlargement of their role in the Muslim world.

Likewise, the recent Iranian support for Middle Eastern Islamists is a strategic move in which predominantly Sunni Islamists are unlikely to bring any Islamic revolution, but they certainly contribute to political chaos. Yemeni President Ali Abdallah Saleh and King Abdullah of Jordan have been destabilized over the past weeks, but even following the fall of Mubarak there is no strong political force in those countries that could become a catalyst for any meaningful change.

However, the politically charged environment of the Middle East could have a cascading effect in Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

The emergence of Iran's supreme leader after a long time and his call for an Islamic awakening

in the Middle East does not come with any material support to Sunni Islamists of the Arab world, but Iran will certainly finance an "Islamic awakening" in the Shi'ite circles of Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, like it did when Saudi Arabia and Yemen jointly suppressed Iranian-backed Shi'ite revolts in 2009. Bahrain has always been dependent on Saudi National Guards to control possible Iranian-backed Shi'ite unrest.

Ideologically, Sunni Islam and the Shi'ite Islam have been political rivals from the beginning. Historically, there is only one single alliance of the two ideologies, when *Bani Fatima* (the decedents of the Prophet Mohammad) and *Bani Abbas* (decedents of Prophet's uncle Abbas) together toppled the Umayyad Dynasty and brought the Abbasid Dynasty into power in 750 AD. That alliance only lasted four years of al-Saffah Abbasi's reign.

Shariati coined the term *Willayat-e-Faqih* (guardianship of the Islamic jurist until the re-emergence of al-Mahdi) and revived Islamic laws in the Shi'ite religion and created space for an Islamic revolution. The doctrine was a new bid for an alliance between Sunni Islam and the Shi'ite Islam - this time Shi'ite Iran was the forerunner of revolution and Sunni Islamists were adherents. However, it remained an uneasy alliance despite Iran providing protection to Muslim Brotherhood leaders and al-Qaeda and supporting the Palestinian Islamist resistance.

With al-Qaeda constructing a war theater from Afghanistan to Central Asia and from Iraq to Somalia, and the Muslim Brotherhood leading an uprising in the Middle East and North Africa, both Sunni Islam and the Shi'ite Islam are entering into a decisive phase.

However, their concepts of *Imamat* (Shi'ite leadership) and the caliphate (Sunni leadership) will inevitably collide and co-existence in any shape will not be possible. Come the Shi'ite insurgencies in the Middle East, for which Iran 's supreme leader has suddenly come to the forefront as their champion, deadly encounters will begin between these two main segments of the Muslim world.