

Iran's peace offensive

From OIC to NAM

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Global Research, August 22, 2012

22 August 2012

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [IRAN: THE NEXT WAR?](#)

The discrepancy between Western media on the Middle East and the reality is astounding. Egypt's Mubarak is a good guy and reliable ally until, presto, he is a bad guy, corrupt, a tyrant, yesterday's goods. This extreme myopia in the interests of empire is the case across the board. So it should come as no surprise, that 'Axis of Evil' Iran, supposedly just itching to build atomic bombs and terrorize one and all, has good relations — getting better all the time — not only its neighbours Afghanistan (reconstruction aid plus a new rail link from Herat to the Persian Gulf) and Pakistan (the gas Peace Pipeline), but its not-so-friendly rivals Saudi Arabia and now Egypt.

This month there are two conferences — OIC and NAM — where Iran's increasingly prominence internationally is on display. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) meeting last week in Mecca saw Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad sitting next to Saudi King Abdullah bin Abulaziz, and frank discussion about Syria, with Iran making the decision to expel Syria look foolish and pointless. Surely the Syrian leadership should have been invited to make its case first; as it stands, the expulsion is a violation of the OIC charter. "By suspending Syria's membership, this does not mean you are moving towards resolving an issue. By this, you are erasing the issue," said Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi. And making things worse, he could have added.

Iran had every reason to boycott the OIC meeting, or come and denounce its hosts for supporting the ruthless suppression of the Bahraini uprising. Instead, Iranian officials came to the OIC to try to mend fences with the pro-US, anti-Iranian Saudi and Gulf states (and assure their attendance at the NAM conference this week), and try to bring the bloodshed in Syria to an end. "Every country, especially OIC countries, must join hands to resolve this issue in such a way that will help the peace, security and stability in the region," said Salehi. What better place or better time for the devout Ahmedinejad than Mecca as Ramadan comes to a close? The Saudi king even announced a gift for Iran and the world's Shia with his initiative of a Sunni-Shia dialogue centre.

Iran's foreign policy *demarche* chalked up another plus with Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi's announcement that he, not his new Vice-President Mahmoud Mekki, will attend the NAM summit this week in Tehran, the first visit of an Egyptian head of state (or any senior official for that matter) since the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and diplomatic relations were severed in 1980 following Egypt's peace treaty with Israel.

Speculation is rife as to just where Egypt is headed following the Arab Spring, called in Tehran the Islamic Awakening. The ousters of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia were hailed in Tehran as echoes of Iran's 1979 ouster of the Shah. Again

Western media dismissed this comparison, though the parallels were unmistakable — both leaders were corrupt, secular, pro-US. Instead, media tried to draw a parallel between the youthful, westernized Facebook activists in Cairo in 2011 and their Tehran equivalents during presidential elections in 2009, as if the Islamic character of Egypt and Iran was something ephemeral, and the Facebook crowd represents the true voice of the people. Egypt's tumultuous months following the 2011 revolution, resulting in the Islamists' triumph at the polls, and Iranian resolve today attest to the true nature and state of their revolutions.

Morsi's first foreign visit was to Saudi Arabia, to meet Egypt's most important neighbour, where he performed the Umra. His second major foreign policy photo-op was with Gaza Prime Minister Ismail Haniya. After ousting his top pro-US generals, Morsi made his return trip to Mecca last week, and after a trip to Beijing, he will visit Tehran. No doubt Washington will finally see the new face of Egypt, but there is no question that this is not the Egypt that the US took for granted as a loyal sidekick for 40 years.

So it came as no surprise to neutral observers that the Egyptian position on Syria at the OIC summit was not one that fits US Middle East policy. Yes, Morsi stated, it was "time for the Syrian regime to leave", but he pointedly refused foreign intervention and called for a contact group of Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and Egypt to bring about a nonviolent change. Morsi and the Egyptian MB have all along been calling for a ceasefire and peaceful resolution, in line with the Russian/ Iranian position, despite the persecution of the Syrian MB for many years by a largely secular regime, and MB involvement in the armed insurgency in Syria.

This is in keeping with the long-held position of the Egyptian MB against the use of violence, a position which paid off in spades with the Egyptian revolution. Egypt is not Algeria, Afghanistan — or Syria, but moving forward as a mature, stable democracy, where the president takes principled positions reflecting the aspirations of his people. Qatar's \$2 billion offered at the OIC to shore up Egypt's foreign reserves did not change Morsi's mind.

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast supported Morsi's proposal for a broad-based Muslim resolution of the Syrian stand-off: "Syria has turned into a point of confrontation between all the arrogant powers and the entire Islamic resistance movement." If Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran — with Egypt as catalyst — can present a united front to both the Assad regime and the many opposition groups, neither will have anywhere to go, and a resolution will happen. The 57-member OIC, founded in 1969, representing almost two billion Muslims worldwide, is charged with "promoting solidarity among members and upholding peace and security". Egypt and Iran merely held the OIC to its professed goal.

Egypt's rapprochement with Iran is long overdue, held in check by the Mubarak regime's toadying to the US and Israel. One of the first ships to go through the Suez Canal after the revolution last year, long before the MB came to power through its Freedom and Justice Party, was an Iranian warship. Even under Mubarak, the pressure to normalize relations was mounting, with trade increasing and normalization of relations between EgyptAir and IranAir. Full diplomatic relations are only a matter of months.

Conferences come and go, but they are always a bit of a litmus test for the host country. The 16th Non-aligned Movement (NAM) summit — dismissed by the *Washington Post* as a "bacchanal of nonsense" — in Tehran from August 26-31 is being attended by virtually all

NAM's 120 member countries, including over 40 heads of state, with current NAM President Morsi the guest of honour. Egypt hosted the last NAM conference in 2009, and according to protocol, the Egyptian head of state presides over NAM activities until the next conference. That meant first Hosni Mubarak, then Field Marshall Mohamed Tantawi, and as of 1 July Mohamed Morsi. (Egypt last hosted the NAM conference in 1964, and Gamal Abdel-Nasser headed the organization from 1964-1970.)

NAM was founded in Belgrade in 1961 by Yugoslav president Josip Broz Tito, Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah, and Indonesian president Sukarno, all legends of the national liberation movement, with solid anti-imperial credentials, who advocated a middle course for the developing world between the Western and Eastern blocs in the Cold War. Its principles, like the OIC's, are solidarity and peaceful resolution of conflicts, though it was founded as a counterweight to the superpowers, abjuring big power military alliances and pacts, while the OIC was founded and originally funded by Saudi Arabia as an explicitly anti-communist club solidly in the Western camp. Neither organization has had much influence in world affairs, NAM going into decline after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the OIC — as its latest resolution on Syria attests - never straying far from the US policy fold.

Nonetheless, NAM represents nearly two-thirds of UN members and 55% of the world's population. At the seventh summit held in New Delhi in 1983, the movement described itself as "history's biggest peace movement", placing equal emphasis on disarmament. However, since the end of the Cold War, NAM has struggled to find relevance, as other blocs such as BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) formed to act as a counterweight to the sole remaining superpower, not based so much on ex-colonial status, but on ability to project influence. Brazil has never been a member of NAM.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, NAM sponsored a campaign for restructuring commercial relations between developed and developing nations, the New International Economic Order and its cultural offspring, the New World Information and Communication Order, which still has relevance today. The movement is publicly committed to sustainable development and the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals, making international financial decision-making more democratic, easing poor countries' debt burden, making trade fairer and increasing foreign aid.

By hosting the conference and taking on the responsibility for NAM leadership, Iran is clearly intent on injecting new life into the most important anti-imperialist international organization, given that the UN, the OIC, and the Arab League are all more or less subservient to the US Middle East agenda.

NAM summits have traditionally been held every few years. Of the last three, two were hosted by Muslim countries — Malaysia (2003) and Egypt (2009). The 2006 conference was hosted by Cuba. NAM disappeared from sight under Egyptian control, but the new prominence of Muslim countries in NAM's affairs shows that the Muslim world has begun to take on the mantle of third world solidarity once claimed by the socialist world. As China becomes a developed superpower concerned primarily with its own regional power and economic well-being, and Russia joins the Euro-club, the Muslim world is redefining itself, with NAM corresponding to its age-old concerns with equality and social justice.

No doubt the NAM resolution will confirm Morsi's proposal on Syria, Iran's right to take advantage of peaceful nuclear energy, condemn Israel's nuclear weapons and ongoing theft

of Palestinian land, and the West's use of double standards on terrorism and use of force in foreign relations. This would be in keeping with its past criticism of the US invasion of Iraq, the War on Terrorism, attempts to stifle Iran's nuclear energy plans, and other actions which it denounced as human rights violations and attempts to run roughshod over the sovereignty of smaller nations.

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