

## ***Al-Qaeda and its Affiliates in Light of the Turmoil in the Arab World***

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With the outbreak of the uprisings known as the Arab spring, many commentators and academics have insisted that al-Qaeda and its affiliates in world jihad are on the losing side in the new political map. Some have even gone so far as to suggest that the Arab spring was a death blow for jihadists and the ideas they represent. This feeling stems from the fact that those who set the protests in motion were acting in the name of liberal democratic ideas and waged their struggle with largely non-violent means, in stark contrast to the message and practices of al-Qaeda and its affiliates.

Today, it is apparent that these assessments were, at best, premature. It is true that al-Qaeda, under the leadership of Dr. Ayman Zawahiri, Bin Laden's successor, is still under pressure from an intensive worldwide anti-terror campaign that has effectively neutralized many of its senior commanders and is preventing it, at least at this point, from carrying out spectacular terror attacks in Western countries. On the other hand, it appears that the Arab spring has actually created for al-Qaeda and its affiliates more opportunities to relocate to and act in countries that have been harmed by the turmoil in the Middle East. In fact, the instability of the new regimes, the dismantling of the security apparatuses that previously acted firmly and efficiently against their people, the emergence of uncontrolled territories that provide refuge and allow almost unhindered activity, and the release of their prisoners, who are again filling their ranks, are all clear gains for the organization and its affiliates. Thus, for example, the governmental vacuum created with

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the departure of President Saleh from Yemen — the country in which the activity of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the closest partner of al-Qaeda (Central) is concentrated — allows the organization freedom of action in the tribal areas in the south of the country and even in the major cities like Zinjibar, Rada, and others. It has also enabled it to take over several of these cities and free many of its members from the country's prisons. Those who were freed rejoined the organization, beefed up its ranks, and increased its strength. In Libya, too, it appears that forces belonging to al-Qaeda supporters are exploiting the country's lack of governmental stability to establish their hold on parts of it, to reinforce their ranks with released prisoners, and to stockpile sophisticated weapons that were found in Qaddafi's abandoned warehouses. These activists also export weapons to various areas of fighting around the world in order to upgrade their affiliates' ability to cause damage in a way that is likely to constitute a significant threat, in general, to civilian life, and in particular, to civil aviation around the world.

The turmoil in the Arab world creates more complex security and diplomatic challenges for Israel. Previous regimes, and certainly the regime of Husni Mubarak in Egypt, were sworn enemies of al-Qaeda and stopped its members from approaching the border with Israel and harming Israeli interests in their territory. Even governments hostile to Israel, such as Syria, Lebanon (mainly Hizbullah), and Hamas in Gaza prevented activity by al-Qaeda and its affiliates because they wished to avoid incidents with Israel that were not initiated by them or under their control. Mubarak's ouster and the resulting hope of replacing him with a regime of Islamic law in the most important Arab country, which Zawahiri sees as the main vision of al-Qaeda under his leadership, has not been realized. Nevertheless, the dismantling of the internal security apparatuses in Egypt, which pursued al-Qaeda members with cruel efficiency to the bitter end, killing, imprisoning, and torturing them, is an important message for jihadist organizations in Egypt, including in the Sinai. Many members of these organizations have gone free, and some of them, especially the young ones, are likely to be an important reserve of manpower for al-Qaeda. The Salafist group's achievement in the parliamentary elections also ensures important political backing for the organization's activities and ideas.

However, it is nearly certain that at this point, the pragmatic positions declared by the heads of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (which won 216 out of 498 seats in the Egyptian parliamentary elections), their avoidance

(thus far) of an unequivocal declaration of intent to cancel the peace treaty with Israel, and their emerging willingness to maintain correct relations with the West – including the United States, the declared enemy of al-Qaeda – all suggest the possibility of a continued conflict between the old-new regime in Egypt (including pragmatic Islamist elements) and al-Qaeda and the Salafist organizations. Thus, terrorist activity aimed at Israel from the Egyptian border, including the repeated attacks on the pipeline that supplies gas from Egypt to Israel and Jordan, the violent incursion into the Israeli embassy in Cairo, and the attack on Eilat by a mixed Palestinian-Egyptian squad from Sinai in August 2011, which caused the death of eight Israelis and led to tension in Israeli-Egyptian relations, indicate the great potential for friction between Egypt and Israel, which al-Qaeda and its affiliates will try to stir up. The increase in terrorist activity by extremist Islamist elements in Sinai, chiefly Bedouins, backed by al-Qaeda members who were freed and came to the desert region armed with sophisticated weapons smuggled from Libya, and the strengthening of Salafist elements in Gaza, who are increasing cooperation with them, constitute an opportunity for direct action against Israeli territory by al-Qaeda and its partners in the worldwide jihad.

In conclusion, it appears that governmental instability and looser control by new Arab governments over the sovereign territory of their countries is providing al-Qaeda and its affiliates with room for action, the ability to recruit people, and access to more weapons. This will probably enable al-Qaeda and its affiliates to develop operational capabilities and more convenient access for actions against Israel on its territory, which they have sought in the past and failed to obtain, and for inflicting harm on Israeli and Jewish interests in Arab countries – all in the spirit of the times, which depicts Israel as an illegitimate state or, at least, as a state that acts brutally against all Arab and Muslim interests. However, in the coming years, al-Qaeda and its partners are likely to find themselves between a rock and a hard place. In addition to the need to survive the West's prolonged war on terror, they will have to deal with a new and no less difficult challenge: conflict with regimes in which the Muslim Brotherhood – whose relatively pragmatic policy is heresy to al-Qaeda and its affiliates – is expected to be dominant. That may well result in a head-on collision.

