

A Golden Opportunity? Al-Qaeda and the Uprisings in the Middle East

Yoram Schweitzer and Gilad Stern

Introduction

In recent months, government officials, commentators, and Middle East experts have debated how the wave sweeping through the Arab world affects al-Qaeda. The common assumption is that the events in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and other countries are a serious blow to the organization. This notion is based on the assessment that the “Arab spring”¹ – in which, as far as is known, al-Qaeda did not play any part – expresses the desire of the masses in Arab countries for democratization. However, democracy is a concept that is diametrically opposed to al-Qaeda’s worldview, which sees it as a form of government that negates the values of Islam and is therefore a “road to hell.”² In addition, after two decades in which al-Qaeda’s leaders declared their determination to bring about a revolutionary change against the corrupt, infidel regimes in the Arab and Muslim world through “armed struggle, holy war, and self-sacrifice” (*al-muqawama al-musallaha*, *jihād*, and *istishhād*), and after years in which they expressed their confidence that only in such a way will these regimes fall, it is clear that these declarations have not translated into reality and instead have presented the organization as politically irrelevant.

This article seeks to examine whether, as many claim, the popular uprisings in the Arab world do in fact portend the end of al-Qaeda, or whether the new situation may actually provide it fertile and convenient

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ground for implementing its long term strategic struggle, making it easier and safer for activists to be present in these states and recruit new cadres to their ranks while taking advantage of the unrest. To that end, the article will review the main arguments that claim that the Arab spring augurs the end of al-Qaeda, and will then analyze statements by the organization's leaders and supporters – shaped by their perception of al-Qaeda's mission – on the significance of the recent events. Against this background, an assessment will be made how the emerging situation is liable to affect the organization's operational freedom.

The Beginning of the End for al-Qaeda?

Many researchers and commentators who have analyzed the recent uprisings in the Middle East view them as the beginning of the end of al-Qaeda. They claim that for the organization, the events known as the Arab spring were “the worst thing that has happened since al Qaeda was created,”³ and that it implies no less than “al-Qaeda's fall.”⁴ There have been a number of key arguments for this assessment. First, the fact that the current turmoil in the Middle East has mainly taken place through a relatively non-violent and popular uprising has been a “blow to the jihadist narrative,”⁵ since in contrast to the path of terror proposed by al-Qaeda's leaders, the mass non-violent demonstrations expressed “a repudiation of everything that Osama bin Laden preached and stood for,”⁶ and were “completely against what al Qaeda is preaching.”⁷

Second, the slogans at the center of the civil uprising have made it clear that the masses in Arab countries yearn for democratization, a concept that is completely contrary to al-Qaeda's way of thinking. For al-Qaeda, “the rule of the majority” is “without abidance by any religion, morality, value or principle.”⁸ It is a human construct, and thus contradicts the concept of the total superiority of the divine creator and his unique ability to determine the fate of human beings.

Third, after more than two decades of condemnations by al-Qaeda of the corrupt dictators who led the Muslim Arab states, the Arab masses “have risen to topple their leaders – and Al Qaeda has played absolutely no role.”⁹ International jihad organizations are described as having been left behind, as “each day's demonstration shows how irrelevant al-Qaida's philosophy is.”¹⁰ Following the killing of Osama Bin Laden, President Obama argued that “even before his death, al-Qaeda was

losing its struggle for relevance.”¹¹ Brian Jenkins also concurred that “the biggest long term threat to al-Qaeda is irrelevancy.”¹²

Fourth, a widespread claim holds that “the spread of democracy in the Arab world is depriving the terrorist movement of its reason for being,”¹³ and that “if you have freedom, al-Qaeda will go away.”¹⁴ Therefore, senior officials in the US administration have made it clear that they support the “democratic revolutions” in Egypt and other countries in the region, *inter alia*, because they help the struggle against extremism and violence and against an enemy like al-Qaeda.¹⁵ Democracy, they claim, will provide the various schools of thought in Arab countries – and young people in particular – many avenues of expression and thus will make it difficult for al-Qaeda to recruit new activists. As a former CIA intelligence officer stated, “democracy is bad news for terrorists. The more peaceful channels people have to express grievances and pursue their goals, the less likely they are to turn to violence.”¹⁶

Finally, commentators claim that irrespective of the turmoil and the demonstrations in the Middle East, al-Qaeda has become less popular in the Muslim world over the past decade. A series of polls published by the PEW Research Center from 2003 through March 2011 has ostensibly strengthened this claim by showing a sustained decline in support for al-Qaeda and Bin Laden in polls conducted in seven different Muslim countries.¹⁷ CNN commentator Peter Bergen, a known expert on the organization’s history, also claims that in fact “even before the revolutionaries first took to the streets of Tunisia, al Qaeda was losing the ‘war of ideas’ in the Islamic world.”¹⁸ To many people, the series of events in the Arab world constituted further proof of the fact that al-Qaeda is unable to motivate the wider public, and that it has finally lost the support of the Muslim street.

Al-Qaeda’s Perspective on the Arab Spring

The response by al-Qaeda and its supporters to the Arab spring is necessarily based on its perception of its role in the historical processes that lead to the realization of its vision: the return of Islam to its natural place of leadership in the world and the establishment of an Islamic caliphate. Al-Qaeda sees itself as a catalyst that will lead the young people of Islam to rise up against what, in its view, is the unbearable situation of the Muslim world: a state of inferiority, exploitation, despoilment,

and humiliation. Responsibility for this depressed situation is ascribed to the infidel regimes that rule the Arab world, which survive thanks to the patronage of the United States. Al-Qaeda's strategy for action, expressed in *Knights under the Prophet's Banner* by Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Bin Laden's former deputy and current appointed leader, states that these regimes should be removed and replaced by regimes that conduct themselves according to Islamic law and models that existed at the time of the Prophet Muhammad. This principle is basic to al-Qaeda's view, and serves as a guideline for all dimensions. To al-Qaeda's commanders, the only possible way to fulfill this vision is through military jihad, because these regimes will not willingly give up their control or their deviant path. Al-Qaeda's leaders see themselves as leading the awakening Islamic camp through terrorist activities that will attack the centers of power in the Arab Muslim world and their supporters, and chart the correct path for the youth of Islam to achieve their vision. In their view, this struggle is long term, and while it requires historical patience (*sabr*), its successful conclusion is assured in advance because Allah and righteousness are on their side.¹⁹

Many people were taken by surprise by the fast pace of the Arab uprisings in Tunisia and in Egypt, even before they had spread to other countries. This includes the senior officials in al-Qaeda, who are objects of an intensive worldwide manhunt, and whose responses to events in the world around them are generally delayed and fragmented. For example, al-Zawahiri's initial reaction was late; he gave his blessings to the protesters even before he heard of Mubarak's fall. Later, though, he published polished declarations that were more timely, in which he expressed support and enthusiasm for events taking place in the Middle East. Al-Zawahiri addressed the "honorable free" revolutionaries in the Arab world and encouraged the Muslim nation to continue to work for real change until a "righteous and just" regime comes to power. He stated that "America's defeat has begun appearing in the horizon, and her helpers have begun falling."²⁰ Bin Laden himself conveyed his blessings to the protesters and called the revolutions an "historic opportunity to raise the *ummah* and be liberated from enslavement to the wishes of the rulers and the man-made laws and the Western domination." In his last message to the Islamic nation before he was killed he stated, "we share with you happiness and joy, cheerfulness and delight."²¹ Abu Yahya al-

Libi, who was mentioned as a possible successor to Bin Laden, mainly because of his popularity among the younger generation of global jihad activists and his personal record as a fighter and a senior writer from among the al-Qaeda leadership, called the toppling of the regimes “one step of many efforts to reach the goal.”²²

Al-Qaeda’s position was perhaps best expressed by the most popular and active spokesman among the senior officials of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Anwar al-Awlaki. In a May 2011 article in *Inspire* magazine, Awlaki showed exceptional knowledge of the controversy in the West over the recent events, and amusedly referred to the debate that was conducted in the West concerning the Arab spring’s meaning for al-Qaeda. While quoting Hillary Clinton, dismissing Peter Bergen, and mocking Robert Gates for their interpretations, he explained that “we do not know yet what the outcome [of the uprisings] would be, and we do not have to. The outcome doesn’t have to be an Islamic government for us to consider what is occurring to be a step in the right direction.” In the minds of al-Qaeda’s leaders, whatever regimes come to power after Mubarak, Qadaffi, and Ben Ali, the recent events bespeak an unprecedented change for the better for supporters of jihad. As Awlaki noted, “our mujahidin brothers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and the rest of the Muslim world will get a chance to breathe again after three decades of suffocation.”²³

Statements made by members of the al-Qaeda camp and their affiliates reveal their belief that the toppling of the corrupt infidel Arab regimes by the protesting masses is a blessing from Heaven, a realization of their hopes, and proof that Allah is with them on the road to victory. The way they see it, the work of the righteous is done by others; anyone who engages in the work and promotes the highest interest of the Muslim nation by removing the infidel regimes is an emissary sent to fulfill a divine commandment and will ultimately help bring about the realization of the divine rule on earth by the path chosen and forged by al-Qaeda. Moreover, al-Qaeda’s leadership anticipates that the initial enthusiasm marking the protest wave will soon be replaced by disappointment and discontent. Such

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disillusionment will shatter the achievements of the Arab spring, causing it to implode.²⁴ Indeed, al-Qaeda sees nascent signs of this phenomenon in Egypt, where the masses are already regrouping in order to achieve a second revolution.²⁵

It is clear from these statements that al-Qaeda's leaders hope that the protesters' success in Tunisia and in Egypt will continue in Yemen, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, and other Muslim nations. However, these statements should also be viewed critically, and understood as propaganda and encouragement for al-Qaeda's supporters who are facing much uncertainty. Recent and current events, while consistent with the professed desire of the organization to topple the infidel regimes, still force al-Qaeda and its supporters to contend with a path that is contrary to what they believed would bring about change.²⁶

The Arab Spring: Fertile Ground for Jihadists

Although the orientation of the new regimes is unclear in countries where there has already been a change of leadership – Tunisia and Egypt – and the fate of a number of regimes that are fighting to survive has not yet been determined, it appears that even today, the new situation brings several advantages for al-Qaeda and its affiliates on the path of global jihad. One of the immediate results of the revolutionary wave in some of these states is the dismantling of the old security apparatuses, which often employed extreme and uninhibited violence and were the regimes' main tool for confronting Salafist-jihadist elements. In Egypt, for example, in light of the hostility of the masses toward the security apparatuses, Mansour al-Essawy, the new minister of the interior, announced that the State Security Investigations agency (*Mubahath al-Dawla*)²⁷ would be dismantled. The agency bore most of the burden of surveillance, investigations, and intelligence operations against terrorist organizations, including Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), which today is a central part of al-Qaeda, and was in the past led by al-Zawahiri. The transitional government in Tunisia also announced that it would immediately dismantle the political police and the state security apparatus.²⁸ If the governments are changed elsewhere in the region, they will likely take similar steps in order to appease the masses, and this policy will increase the jihadist organizations' leeway in propaganda, recruitment, and expansion of existing networks.

In countries where the struggle of the masses has not yet been determined, the weakness of the central government and the accompanying chaos are fertile ground for al-Qaeda to strengthen its power base in an unprecedented manner. In Yemen, AQAP has in recent months been working against the central government in Sana'a and carrying out many terrorist attacks against security forces, while attempting to strengthen its ties with other opposition elements.²⁹ In Libya, al-Qaeda fighters are maintaining close contacts with the Libyan opposition;³⁰ in Morocco, al-Qaeda activists were behind several instances of violence throughout the country;³¹ and in Tunisia, two al-Qaeda activists were arrested near the Libyan border while carrying explosive belts and a number of bombs.³²

Israel too is affected by the governmental vacuum; according to security service officials, the state of anarchy and the lack of governability today in the Sinai Peninsula is exploited by terrorist organizations for large scale weapons smuggling.³³ A senior security source in Egypt reinforced this assessment when he announced that 400 al-Qaeda terror activists were tracked in Sinai after they had planned terrorist attacks in Egypt and in the peninsula.³⁴ In addition, as a result of the uprisings, thousands of jihadists escaped or were freed, some from the hard core of the radical Islamic organizations with proven terrorism experience and who were imprisoned for many years for subversion. Thus, from the anarchy, al-Qaeda and its affiliates gained the opportunity to refresh and renew their ranks: in Egypt, the military regime released al-Zawahiri's brother, together with 59 political prisoners.³⁵ They joined 1,659 additional prisoners who were released during the events that led to the ousting of Husni Mubarak.³⁶ In Libya, in a prisoner uprising on February 18, a large number of prisoners escaped from the al-Kuifia prison.³⁷ These were in addition to some 850 radical Islamic activists, among them the brother of Yahya al-Libi, Abd al-Wahhab Muhammad Qaid,³⁸ who were recently released by the regime.³⁹ Thus although the size and effectiveness of the forces that support al-Qaeda

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are uncertain, and there is much doubt as to their ability to exploit the events in any country to seize control, they are taking advantage of the governmental vacuum in the areas in which there is weak governance in order to strengthen themselves and their ability to train new activists to continue their struggle in the future.

Conclusion

After seven months of mass uprisings among the citizens of Arab countries and a bloody process that has led to regime changes in two countries and continues to manifest itself in neighboring states, the attempt by analysts to determine that the revolutionary process signifies the end of al-Qaeda and its affiliates appears overly hasty. Even if the hopes of the masses who filled the squares are realized and democratic regimes are indeed established in place of the tyrannical regimes that were hitherto in power, sweeping conclusions on the nature of the future regimes and the strategic effects of the changes in the region should be avoided, because it is still unclear how such democracies in the Arab world will act and function.

It is possible that these events, which are liable to cause governmental instability in many Middle East countries in the transition period between the old regimes and the new, are good news for al-Qaeda and for activists of organizations that support the ideas of worldwide jihad. To be sure, the intensive worldwide hunt for al-Qaeda continues, and many senior leaders, Bin Laden included, have been killed. In addition, sympathy from the Muslim community continues to decline. Nonetheless, it is actually the removal of tyrannical regimes that were dependent on effective, cruel, and unrestrained security forces that operated without legal restrictions and widespread, free media coverage characteristic of democratic regimes that is liable to provide fertile ground for al-Qaeda activity. Moreover, al-Qaeda's worldview has been confirmed, with the removal of the heads of Arab infidel regimes as an ostensible expression of divine wonders and fulfillment of the goal to establish a state under Islamic law. Those who helped topple these rulers were emissaries sent to fulfill the divine commandment, and it will be al-Qaeda that continues to fully complete the task according to its chosen means. In addition, governmental instability and governmental vacuums in some Middle East countries suit al-Qaeda's modus operandi, which has exploited

such situations in the past. The escape of hundreds of its prisoners in the wake of the uprisings also provides the organization with important reinforcements of experienced and extremist manpower and will aid it in continuing its struggle.

Nonetheless, ongoing targeted strikes against al-Qaeda's leadership and the worldwide battle against its affiliates are liable to bear fruit and ultimately strike a fatal blow to the organization. This offensive, independent of the uprisings taking place today in the Arab world, may well challenge the fulfillment of the radical ideas al-Qaeda has represented since its establishment, more than two decades ago.

Notes

- 1 The term "Arab spring" was intended to parallel the European "Spring of Nations," a series of revolutions in a number of European states in the nineteenth century against authoritarian regimes to promote the values of democracy and individual liberty. While from an historical perspective the Spring of Nations is often seen as a key stage towards the establishment of European democratic nation states, caution is warranted in predicting the outcome of the revolutionary wave underway in the Arab world.
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