



The Arab Uprisings and al-Qaeda's Peripheral Infiltration: A Tour d'Horizon



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The Arab Awakening now over a year ago has produced various outcomes, intended and unintended, throughout the Middle East by those who initiated and nurtured these often violent uprisings. Both dictators Ben Ali of Tunisia and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak were ousted. Even though Tunisia is undergoing a comparatively smooth transition process with a popularly elected moderate Islamist government, Egypt's revolution is continuously unfolding in a struggle between the Muslim Brotherhood and the ruling military. Protests in Yemen have led to a quasi-

government shuffle following the resignation of President Saleh; however, Saleh and his family retain significant power and the old regime continues to rule. External intervention was witnessed in Bahrain as Saudi-led troops invaded the island to stifle demonstrations and the NATO-led mission in Libya resulted in Colonel Qaddafi's demise. Syria continues to be engulfed in a protracted civil war with no clear end in sight, as President Assad has no intention of relinquishing power and will utilize his superior military against the rebel groups in an effort to sustain the regime. The numerous examples that comprise the so-called 'Arab Spring' have witnessed drastically different levels of internal violence with a profound impact on the respective local populations. However, these developments have also produced significant ramifications concerning regional and international security as various conflicts spill over borders and have created significant opportunities for terrorist elements such as al-Qaeda and its regional affiliates.

The popular uprisings clearly discredit a central tenet in al-Qaeda's ideology concerning violent Jihad as the only means to depose the region's authoritarian regimes. Nevertheless, the organization's leadership successfully shifted its propaganda campaign, focusing on how the uprisings can lead to al-Qaeda's resurgence and the eventual realization of its long-term goal of establishing Islamist governments throughout the region and restoring the Islamic Caliphate. Meanwhile, the emergent Islamist-oriented parties in post-uprising states appear to rival al-Qaeda ideology and perceive its presence as a direct threat to their power. Nonetheless, the terrorist organization and its affiliates remain a serious threat. Al-Qaeda is exploiting the political instability plaguing the turbulent transition periods by targeting disenfranchised sectors of the populations and attempting to fill power vacuums created in peripheral areas as a result of government incapacity to enforce sovereignty throughout the entire country. Regional developments over the past year have therefore enabled al-Qaeda and its affiliates to enhance their presence and capabilities across the Middle East.

During the initial stages of the Arab uprisings, many security observers, particularly in Israel and the United States, believed that their own respective countries' security situations would deteriorate as a result of the loss of strategic allies and the rise of Islamist elements who opposed Western influence in the region. These fears are embodied by the demise of President Mubarak, who safeguarded the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty, a major cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy and regional stability whose future remains uncertain until the political situation in Egypt stabilizes. It is clear the ensuing instability associated with tumultuous regime changes will continue to have implications with respect to regional and international security. With the loss of key U.S. allies in the Arab world and the rise of democratically elected Islamist-oriented governments, who may be more prone to adhere to the will of their respective populations, the West's position and influence in the Middle East has arguably diminished thus far. However, the emerging regional balance is far more complex than simply discerning between "winners" and "losers" of these developments in the longer term.

Al-Qaeda and its Affiliates

Initially, many hoped that the uprisings would lead to more democratic and liberal states that would lead to further isolation of Jihadi elements in society. Unfortunately, these developments have actually created more opportunities for al-Qaeda and its regional affiliates to relocate and enhance their operations in countries that have witnessed the dismantling of their security apparatuses that actively repressed radical elements prior to the uprisings. The emergence of new regimes and the ensuing instability has led to a weakened control of peripheral territories that provide a safe haven and allow almost unhindered access to new bases of operations. Even though the U.S.-led global war on terrorism has resulted in the demise of al-Qaeda's founder, Osama bin Laden, and the decimation of many of al-Qaeda's senior commanders, the instability resulting from the Arab uprisings has led to a release of many associated prisoners who have subsequently re-joined the organization and its affiliates.¹

Libya

Following the death of dictator Muammar Gaddafi, Libya has witnessed significant fragmentation and tribal warfare as the interim government lacks the capacity, and possibly the will, to exercise national sovereignty. Al-Qaeda supporters are exploiting the instability plaguing the National Transitional Council (NTC), by controlling sections of the country and establishing vital bases of operations. This has also enabled Jihadi fighters to reinforce their organizations with released prisoners, a phenomenon witnessed in other countries such as Yemen and Egypt. Most importantly, these groups are actively enhancing their capabilities by acquiring sophisticated weaponry seized from Qaddafi's abandoned warehouses.

The successor organization of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) constitutes one of Libya's main Islamist organizations and its former leader, Abdelhakim Belhadj, is currently running in the upcoming elections. Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the LIFG declared their support for al-Qaeda and contributed their resources and personnel for the global Jihadi cause. Members of the LIFG had been involved in various armed conflicts throughout the years and the group's paramilitary knowledge proved vital in training inexperienced revolutionaries throughout the Libyan campaign to topple Colonel Qaddafi. Historically suppressed by the Libyan dictator, many of the LIFG members now comprise part of the Tripoli Military Council which holds significant influence in the nation's capital. Despite LIFG's disbandment and key members renouncing violence after engaging in Libya's "de-radicalization program", there are concerns that some elements of Libya's future governance will be sympathetic to al-Qaeda's endeavors.

It is important to note that as many as 2,000 Libyan Jihadi volunteers are estimated to have participated in armed conflicts abroad from the mid 1980s to 2011. Almost one in five foreign insurgents who volunteered in Iraq came from eastern Libya – on a per capita basis, more than

twice as many insurgents came from Libya than any other Arab nation.² It is no secret that the eastern section of the country is regarded as having one of the highest concentrations of radical Islamist activity in the region. A senior counterterrorism official revealed that Western intelligence agencies are aware of senior al-Qaeda operative Abdul Basit Azuz's efforts to recruit and train fighters, believing that his redeployment to Libya was sanctioned by al-Qaeda's new leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in an effort to create a base for the organization.³ For years, Libya has been regarded as a strategic interest for al-Qaeda because of its proximity to Egypt. This sentiment is exemplified by the fact that Libya constituted its own entity separate from al-Qaeda's North Africa affiliate – Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). These facts poses considerable implications concerning the extent to which adherence to global Jihadi ideology will influence certain constituencies and to what extent al-Qaeda will succeed in establishing a key foothold in the new Libya.

Sahel Region

It did not take long for the conflict in Libya to spill over throughout the region. This is manifested by the recent military coup in Mali, conducted by ethnic Tuareg militants who returned back to their country with weapons from Libya after failing to defend the Qaddafi regime. The Malian army was ill-equipped to combat the Tuareg separatist insurgency in the north, armed with rocket launchers, machine guns and likely surface to-air missiles raided from Libyan weapon depots as the conflict wound down.⁴ There has been significant concern regarding the increased arms proliferation from Libyan territory to other parts of the region, especially the spread of advanced anti-aircraft rockets throughout North Africa's Sahel expanse.

The al-Qaeda affiliate AQIM has been increasingly active throughout the Sahel region, which has become an ungoverned safe haven for terrorist operations and planning. Regional developments have led to a reinvigorated and strengthened AQIM, exemplified by the group's 2011 attacks in Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and for the first time, Tunisia.⁵ Counteroffensives undertaken by the respective states, including the deployment of thousands of troops and aircrafts, were unsuccessful in stifling the organization's operations in the Sahel. The most advanced Russian surface-to-air missiles (SA-24 and SA-7) have been declared missing from Qaddafi's former weapons depots and have reportedly reached AQIM.⁶ These weapons in particular have the capability of bringing down low-flying aircraft. For example, SA-7s were employed by al-Qaeda in a failed attempt to shoot down an Israeli passenger plane over Kenya in 2002. Therefore, AQIM's enhanced capabilities pose immense implications for regional and international security, as the threat to civilian aviation has amplified. These developments are a direct consequence of the deteriorating state capacity associated with turmoil surrounding the unconsolidated regime transitions in the region. It is clear that Western governments underestimated the unintended consequences associated with the external intervention that led to the demise of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi.

Sinai Peninsula

Following the toppling of President Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's powerful internal security apparatus disintegrated and a significant power vacuum has materialized in the Sinai Peninsula. While the previous regime actively suppressed Islamist and terrorism related operations, post-Mubarak Egypt is witnessing the emergence of significant terrorist presence and activity emanating from the Sinai. In July 2011, the new affiliate of al-Qaeda in the Islamic emirate of the Sinai Peninsula, declared its goal of instituting Shari'a law in the territory, demanding the evacuation of all Egyptian security forces and foreign elements.⁷ Some observers believe that this reflects an attempt by al-Qaeda's new leader, Egyptian native Ayman al-Zawahiri, to accomplish the organization's historic goal of creating an Islamist Egypt that will unleash similar revolutions throughout the Muslim world.

Extremist elements, mainly comprised of Bedouins, are supported by recently freed al-Qaeda members who have migrated to the Peninsula armed with sophisticated weaponry smuggled from Libya. Moreover, there is increasing coordination between these groups and strengthened Salafist forces in the Gaza Strip, constituting a direct threat to Israel and regional stability. The August 2011 terrorist attack on the Israeli southern city of Eilat, killing eight Israelis, exemplifies the sophisticated joint coordination between Palestinian and Egyptian Islamists.⁸ Furthermore, over a dozen attacks on the major pipeline that supplies gas to Israel and Jordan from Egypt emphasizes the extremists' goal of increasing tensions in an effort to damage or extinguish the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty. These developments reinforce concerns that the increasingly radicalized and organized Bedouin have essentially transformed the Sinai into a state within a state, and are now in a position to instigate severe crises that neither Israel nor Egypt desires. What used to constitute the Jewish state's quietest border for 30 years has now become a major hot spot with the potential for causing a severe escalation between the countries. Coupled with the fact that Egypt's presidential candidates and Islamist dominated Parliament are actively calling for a re-evaluation of the Peace Treaty, a major cornerstone for Middle East stability is certainly in jeopardy. Even though an al-Qaeda takeover of the Sinai is unlikely, the fact that radical Islamist ideology is increasingly influencing certain Bedouin tribes in the Peninsula has significant ramifications for the region and the world.

Yemen

As the regime in Yemen felt threatened by the growing protests throughout the 'Arab Awakening', the army was relocated to reinforce the capital city, Sana'a. As a result, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), has been able to conquer significant territories, liberate many of its members from Yemen's prisons, and engage in a recruitment campaign to gain new supporters. Even though U.S. drone strikes continue to decimate the organization's leadership, AQAP remains the most organized and dangerous al-Qaeda affiliate which has been implicated on numerous terrorism plots in the U.S. and other states. AQAP has exploited the political

turmoil in that country, increasing its freedom of action in the tribal areas in the south and several major cities such as Zinjibar, Rada, and others. According to some estimates, AQAP now controls nearly half of the country.⁹ The vacuum created in light of President Saleh's resignation has allowed the organization to further increase its operations in its effort to establish an Islamist state. The military's failed efforts to liberate the provincial capital of Zinjibar resulted in the deaths of at least 500 people since March, causing about 100,000 residents to flee.¹⁰ Consequently, the United States is providing logistical support to the Yemeni military and continuing with its drone campaign to help the Government combat AQAP and reclaim the territories. Even though Yemen suffers from an array of other crucial challenges, AQAP's concrete gains achieved throughout the past year in light of regional developments have directly enhanced the organization's strength and capabilities, improving its ability to plan attacks and inflict significant damage both within the Arabian Peninsula and internationally.

Syria

It is becoming increasingly apparent that al-Qaeda's influence in the Syrian crisis is growing, as the movement continues to reverse the flow of insurgents that was established in Iraq. The longer the civil war continues, the greater the potential opportunities for the terrorist enterprise to consolidate their role in the future of the country. Many observers note that al-Qaeda fighters are infiltrating the loosely organized Syrian opposition forces. These trends are exemplified by the fact that some attacks on Syrian government establishments this past year have resembled classic al-Qaeda tactics, such as simultaneous bombings.

Implications for Counter-Terrorism Efforts and Future Strategy

Some analysts believe that the number of fragile or failed states could increase across the region as a result of these dramatic changes, presenting al-Qaeda and its affiliates a greater opportunity to infiltrate in key areas and consolidate control. These terrorist organizations may exploit ongoing economic and political deprivation amongst these societies' disenchanted populations in order to recruit more members as a viable alternative to the status quo. As the leader behind the global war on terrorism and the most influential power in the region, the United States must continue to analyze and evaluate the various options available in addressing these complex issues. This will entail fostering key relationships with new regimes, strengthening existing partnerships, providing logistical support and engaging in covert action to neutralize the threats emanating from terrorist groups as a consequence of the new Middle Eastern order.

The previous secular Arab regimes' intelligence and security services actively suppressed al-Qaeda and other radical Islamist organizations throughout their tenure. However, domestic security agencies are now placing more of a priority on internal concerns and will likely remain less focused on Jihadi groups.¹¹ The uprisings have essentially produced more democratic societies in the sense that emerging governments will be relatively more accountable to their

populations and dependent on public opinion. This may translate into relatively more hostile foreign policies and a reduction in security cooperation between these agencies and their Western counterparts in the face of domestic opposition. However, some analysts believe that regional counterterrorism cooperation with the United States will not suffer from severe setbacks, as long as the U.S. can maintain its central principles while modifying its campaigns according to local contexts.¹²

In the coming years, al-Qaeda will continue to experience significant pressure from an intensified campaign against its bases of operation and members of its leadership through ongoing drone strikes and covert operations. Even though regional developments have presented certain opportunities for terrorist activity, al-Qaeda and its affiliates will have to endure a clash with emergent regimes associated with the relatively pragmatic Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood views any attempts by forces sympathetic to al-Qaeda to enhance their presence as a direct threat to its efforts in reconstructing the new regional order. Furthermore, the Brotherhood's comparatively moderate policies directly contradict al-Qaeda's fundamentalist vision, which may result into a confrontation of tremendous proportions.

Understanding that weak and fragile states attract terrorist groups, the international community must continue developing relationships with emerging governments and helping build effective law enforcement capabilities and a fair system of justice. The world must help enhance the new regimes' ability to assert national sovereignty and continue to advance respect for human rights, as opposed to simply rushing an attempt to impose Western-inspired democracy. The international community must therefore help strengthen accountability throughout the region so that disaffected citizens do not become attracted to extremist ideology. As al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations engage in violent activity to consolidate control, seeking to exploit power vacuums and recruit disenfranchised populations, this is the perfect opportunity for the U.S. and Western nations to intensify the grand strategy of countering global terrorism: enhancing standards of living and thus winning more hearts and minds.

Endnotes:

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