

Al-Qaeda and the Arab Spring

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Introduction

Recent months have witnessed upheaval in the Arab world, which has led to changes in governmental order. One by one, the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya have fallen. Syria and Yemen are seeing increasing anarchy, accompanied by cries to topple their fragile regimes, and anti-government protests are escalating in other countries. Opposition movements from all corners of the ideological spectrum are rearing their heads. The media have dubbed this wave of protest the "Arab Spring"; in the Arab media, its consequences for the actions and the future of Al-Qaeda are being discussed.

For its part, Al-Qaeda has avowedly tried to ride this wave of protest and stand alongside the demonstrators against the regimes of the Middle East.¹ Jihadist Web forums associated with Al-Qaeda have seen much lively discussion of how the organization should respond to the wave of protest.² At the same time, it seems that these protests and the revolutions following in their wake are placing Al-Qaeda in an awkward position since it appears – perhaps correctly – that Al-Qaeda has not been the impetus behind them.

Opinion in the Arab Media

Regarding the influence of the "Arab Spring" on Al-Qaeda, the opinion widely expressed in the Arab media is that release of the masses from the despotic regimes that have to date ruled Arab countries presents an alternative to Al-Qaeda's ideology, which may weaken the organization's hold on the street, now

¹ See <http://www.ict.org.il/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=85iw6w6luDQ%3d&tabid=344>; and <http://www.ict.org.il/NewsCommentaries/Commentaries/tabid/69/Articlsid/964/currentpage/1/Default.aspx>

² See <http://www.ict.org.il/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=Sw3Z9CGx1E8%3d&tabid=344>; and <http://www.ict.org.il/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=RQ5cxOS3NnM%3d&tabid=344>.

that despairing young people have found another, non-violent way to overthrow their oppressors. For example, in a column in *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, Basim Al-Jasr writes, "There is consensus among pundits that Osama bin Laden was not killed in his hiding place in Pakistan on May 1, 2011 by the bullets of an American commando unit, but rather that he 'died politically', after losing the "Jihadist Terrorist War", and now that the younger, Arab and Islamic generation has chosen a different path to liberation and to regaining the rights denied it or lost – [a path] called the 'Arab Spring'".³

Ghassan Charbel, an op-ed writer for *Al-Hayat*, claims, "The events of the 'Arab Spring' have revealed the isolation [of Al-Qaeda], and that it does not represent public sentiment. Al-Qaeda was not an inspiration to those who demonstrated in Tunisia or protested in Tahrir Square in Cairo. It was not photos of its leaders that were held aloft in Benghazi or Sanaa, and neither was its name chanted by demonstrators in Syria." Nevertheless, Charbel warns that chaos could bring Al-Qaeda back into the picture.⁴

A commentator on *Al-Jazeera's* Web site, Muhammad Al-Shanqiti, states, "The decisive majority of Muslims has understood that Al-Qaeda's methods of dislodging its enemies is characterized by moral weakness at some times, and by a lack of political wisdom at many others. This is why Al-Qaeda has not succeeded in penetrating the Muslim conscience, and has failed to become a popular liberation movement like the movements that sought liberation from European imperialism in the 20th century. Since then, the Arab revolutions have breathed new life into, and created a different way of, engendering change, one

³ Basim Al-Jasr, "The Death of Bin Laden and the Arab Spring", *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, May 11, 2011, www.aawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&issueno=11852&article=621215 (Arabic).

⁴ Ghassan Charbel, "The Water of 'Al-Qaeda'", *Al-Hayat*, May 30, 2011, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/272299> (Arabic).

that does not hew to a war of terror against terror, but rather clarifies a political message."⁵

On a television program devoted to Al-Qaeda's absence from the revolutions in the Arab world, former editor of leading newspapers *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* and *Al-Hayat* Jihad Al-Khazen commented that Al-Qaeda is incapable of leading any revolution in the Arab countries, because it is an oppressive organization that has done harm to Islam and the Muslims, and that has never had a popular base of support in any Arab country.

Islamic authority Muhammad Al-Ahmari, who participated in the same program, pointed out that Al-Qaeda's perception of government – which is that a caliphate will be established and led by someone not chosen by the people – differs from the political approach presented by the revolutionaries; he added that he does not expect Al-Qaeda to be a partner [in government and/or in revolution] in the near future. According to Al-Ahmari, Al-Qaeda's ideology has been decimated, and replaced by the ideology of democracy.⁶

Moreover, some have claimed in the media that the Arab regimes that are the target of recent demonstrations have long been using Al-Qaeda to sow fear. They intimate that, in the absence of government order, Al-Qaeda will emerge as the sole alternative; by so warning, they extract monies from Western countries in the name of the war against terror. So claimed Fahmi Al-Huaidy, another participant in the program on *Al-Jazeera*. Similar claims have been made in the Arab media by researchers from Arab countries.

⁵ Muhammad Al-Shanqiti, "Bin Laden's Heritage During a Time of Revolution", *Al-Jazeera*, <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/5B68E00B-5E68-4BF2-BBC7-D8F926E13E6E.htm> (Arabic).

⁶ "The Revolutionary Movement and the Absence of Al-Qaeda", *Al-Jazeera*, May 2, 2011, http://aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/C236AB64-6E27-4AD0-B941-F9535D4D3192.htm?wbc_purpose=basic_current_current_curren (Arabic).

Dr. Nabil Al-Fattah, an expert on Islamic organizations at the Al-Ihram Center for Strategic Studies, told *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, "Many Arab regimes have used the name of Al-Qaeda to generate fear, whether internally or externally." Al-Fattah noted that Al-Qaeda has cells in Arab countries, though it is not known what function they fill. Muntasser Al-Ziyat, a lawyer for Islamic organizations, also averred to *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* that Arab regimes have used Al-Qaeda to incite fear, adding that Al-Qaeda activists have been in Yemen for some 30 years. Al-Ziyat further noted that the regime in Syria has tried to use Al-Qaeda to frighten protesters into ceasing their demonstrations there.⁷

Although the attitude that the so-called "Arab Spring" uprisings are weakening Al-Qaeda by offering an ideological alternative to young people in the Arab world is typical of "mainstream" Arab media at present, it has not been sufficiently elucidated, and so contains a few "holes". Following are several points, which may shed light from a different angle on the inter-relationship between Al-Qaeda and the "Arab Spring".

1. Al-Qaeda does not see itself as a movement of the masses

The participation of Al-Qaeda in the mass movements forming on the Arab street is not a foregone conclusion, but neither is the absence of Al-Qaeda's banner from the public squares necessarily a sign that it has been undermined by the ascent of one or another political ideology. Since they first laid its ideological groundwork, Al-Qaeda's founders have conceived of their organization as having elitist tendencies, as measured in its quality and not its size.

⁷ Muhammad Abd Al-Rauf, "The Threat of Al-Qaeda: The Hanger on which the Arab Leaders Hang Their Excuses for Their Peoples' Rebellion", *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, June 23, 2011, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=11895&article=627793&feature> (Arabic).

In his 1980 book, "Islam and the Future of Humanity", Abdullah Azzam, a founder of Al-Qaeda and the man who laid the organization's ideological foundation, writes of establishing a firm base (*Al-Qa'ida Al-Sulba*), which will be appraised for its quality, not its numbers. In a chapter devoted to the establishment of that base – *al-qaeda* – Azzam states, "We want stiff branches that will not bend with society's winds or bow to its caprices".⁸ Azzam wrote these words when the idea was still in gestation, years before Al-Qaeda was established as an organization.

In effect, the organization's elitist tendency has been reflected in its patterns of activity since its inception. Its members are not wholly integrated into society and, unlike other Islamist organizations such as Hamas and Hizbullah, neither does Al-Qaeda engage in charitable or community and social activities.⁹ Of course, this is not to say that Al-Qaeda does not try to win sympathy on the Islamic street; however, it is worth noting that it does not go out of its way to subsume as broad a public base as possible among its ranks.

An example of how Al-Qaeda perceives itself in light of the recent revolutions in the Arab world, and vis a vis the Arab public in general, can be found on the Web forum Shumukh Al-Islam, associated with Al-Qaeda. As one forum participant writes: "...The Qa'idat Al-Jihad [Al-Qaeda] Organization was established as an elite, militant rescue force to protect the Muslim Nation [Ummat Al-Islam] from Crusader aggression and spur the Muslim Nation to go forth and do what is required of it. [The organization] has never claimed to be an alternative to the Muslim Nation or that it could effect change on its own."

⁸ Abdullah Azzam, "Islam and the Future of Humanity", The Worldwide Shahid Azzam Center, Peshawar, 1980, p. 22, www.azzambooks.4t.com/azzam.htm (Arabic).

⁹ *Al-Jazeera*, July 27, 2006, <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/929D7A40-35CB-4B37-A0AF-C03843774DE0.htm> (Arabic).

He further states, “[Al-Qaeda] does not aspire to win false popularity at the expense of relinquishing [its] principles”. He adds that Al-Qaeda’s goal is to promote the religion and the fundamentals of faith, with this goal being more important than the existence of the organization itself. Regarding recent upheaval in the Arab world, the writer stipulates that Al-Qaeda sees itself as having contributed to the change in people’s consciousness through its use of armed force against its enemies. Further, this writer adds that Al-Qaeda is a rescue force whose demands have ultimately become the demands of the masses: revolt against the authorities, struggle against the Shi’ites and Iran, and cries against democracy – something the Iraqi people already regret.

The writer ends by summarizing that Al-Qaeda is now calling for the implementation of Islamic religious law [Shari’a] and a return to [the ways of the] “salaf” [the “righteous forebears”]. He writes, “The mujahideen have always been ahead of others in their ideas and understanding, and have always raised their nation up to their level”.¹⁰

If such is the case, it is no wonder that even if Al-Qaeda supports recent and continuing changes in the Arab world, even if it derives value from them, it refrains from joining in, preferring to maintain its tried and true patterns of activity – an outgrowth of its ideological roots – and to see itself as responsible for having led people to rebel and hope for change. If we were to accept the claims of the Arab commentators quoted above, we might expect Al-Qaeda to react coldly to the uprising in the Arab world that is diminishing its power. Yet recently, Al-Qaeda’s leaders have been seen to express “support [for the revolution] from a distance”. The speeches of both Al-Zawahiri and bin Laden

¹⁰ Shankai Al-Najdi, “The Dialectic of War and Peace between Al-Qaeda and the Arab Revolutions”, May 11, 2011, <http://180.235.150.135/~shamikh/vb/showthread.php?t=109402> (Arabic).

have extolled the overthrow of Arab regimes and commended the actions of the rebels.¹¹

2. The lack of a real ideological alternative

As noted, multiple Arab commentators have claimed that the upheaval in the Arab world has weakened Al-Qaeda's hold on the Arab public, because revolution is providing Arab young people with an ideological alternative. But has an orderly ideological alternative been proposed, which could constitute an ideological alternative to Al-Qaeda?

If we examine the situation in Egypt, we see that although Mubarak's regime has fallen, the political future of the country remains shrouded in fog. The unequivocal call to depose Mubarak was not accompanied by consensus as to the direction of new patterns of government – neither liberal-democratic nor Islamist ones. As Muhammad Shuman has written in *Al-Hayat*, it seems that Egypt is now torn between supporters of a democratic civil state which would be tolerant and respect human rights, and a Salafist Islamist movement that is calling for the implementation of Shari'a [Islamic religious law], beside which even the Muslim Brotherhood seems moderate. Neither is it clear what the Muslim Brotherhood intends by the state's "Islamic authority", for which it is calling.¹²

In an article published in *Al-Hayat*, even Jihad Al-Khazen, who noted Al-Qaeda's absence from the revolutions in the Arab world, warned against the Salafist

¹¹ See *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, May 20, 2011, <http://aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=11861&article=622573&feature> (Arabic) and *Al-Jazeera*, June 8, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/CEECFBFE-8A0A-47AA-B21A-155FF6CBB386.htm> (Arabic).

¹² Muhammad Shuman, "The Civil Egyptian State or the Islamic Authority?", *Al-Hayat*, May 25, 2011, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/270346> (Arabic).

threat to Egypt.¹³ Naturally, the Salafi movement was able to rear its head in Egypt thanks to the collapse of the Mubarak government. Similarly, in Yemen and Syria it may also be said that there is no clear alternative – in particular, no alternative that might contradict the ideas of Al-Qaeda – to draw young people away from such a path.

Further, if it is not yet clear what direction the governments of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya will take, how much more occluded is the direction of countries whose regimes may yet fall in the future. At present, we are witnessing the awakening of Salafist movements¹⁴ which, though they may not grasp the reins of power in the near future, may nevertheless still influence popular sentiment. Of course, it is also possible that the Muslim Brotherhood will come to power.¹⁵ Although such movements, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, are not tied to Al-Qaeda, it is too soon to know what their attitude toward Al-Qaeda will be, if they do come to power.

3. The riots are weakening strong central government

Anwar Al-Awlaki, who was until his murder in September one of Al-Qaeda's most outstanding ideologues, declared in March of this year that the weakness of Yemen's central government had made that country fertile ground for Al-Qaeda's activities. He ridiculed the commonly-held opinions that the impetus for the revolutions in the Arab world comes from secular young people and democratic movements, and that these revolutions will strike a blow against Islamic

¹³ Jihad Al-Khazen, "Are Those the Future of Egypt?", *Al-Hayat*, May 2, 2011, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/261898> (Arabic).

¹⁴ Jihad Al-Khazen, "Are Those the Future of Egypt?", *Al-Hayat*, May 2, 2011, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/261898> (Arabic); *Al-Jazeera*, April 16, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.net/Mob/Templates/Postings/NewsDetailedPage.aspx?GUID=A2696FC-E4B9-4FC0-9634-3A0AFBF07884> (Arabic).

¹⁵ *Al-Ahram*, July 19, 2011, <http://www.ahram.org.eg/World/News/90163.aspx> (Arabic).

movements. In light of the current upheaval in the Arab world, Al-Awlaki explained that, "Our brothers, Jihadi fighters in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and throughout the Islamic world, are breathing freely after several decades of suffocation". His message was clear: a weak central government, whether democratic or dictatorial, was essential to the establishment of Al-Qaeda. And indeed, the Arab media knows to inform us that Al-Qaeda succeeds in setting down roots wherever the central government is flaccid and ineffectual and society divided: Somalia,¹⁶ Yemen, the Sahel,¹⁷ Iraq¹⁸.

Moreover, even before Qaddafi's fall, when his rule had been weakened but he had yet to capitulate, the North African press warned that the rioting and instability in Libya was allowing for a trickle of heavy armaments and ground-to-air missiles to reach Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.¹⁹

In May, 2011, the Web site of the *Al-Jazeera* Network interviewed Islamu Ould Mustafa who said, in the context of Al-Qaeda's activity in North Africa, that despite a certain political depletion following rebellion in the Arab world, Al-Qaeda had in fact increased its military strength, thanks to the bedlam surrounding security in Libya. Similarly, he claimed the elimination of bin Laden had increased Al-Qaeda's recruitment.²⁰ Thus, even if we account for the weakening influence on Al-Qaeda of the "Arab Spring", we cannot ignore that parallel influences are

¹⁶ "Al-Qaeda in ... Regions", Al-Jazeera Center for ..., January 18, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/73609322-EF86-4CE3-B318-3AC01E6F9B5F.htm> (Arabic).

¹⁷ *Al-Khabar*, September 30, 2010, <http://www.elkhabar.com/ar/watan/230646.html> (Arabic).

¹⁸ Rafid Fadhl Ali, "Al-Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers/Mesopotamia", *Al-Jazeera*, September 19, 2010, <http://aljazeera.net/portal/templates/Postings/PocketPcDetailedPage.aspx?GUID=%7BA918DF17-C15D-46EE-A580-E304820FBFCE%7D&No=1> (Arabic).

¹⁹ *Al-Khabar*, March 29, 2011, <http://www.elkhabar.com/ar/autres/hadath/248903.html?print> (Arabic); *Al-Khabar*, August 23, 2011, <http://www.elkhabar.com/ar/politique/262955.html> (Arabic).

²⁰ *Al-Jazeera*, May 3, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/266E4C55-2498-4F2A-AECD-AE4D6DC54619.htm> (Arabic).

strengthening it, enabling it to take advantage of the chaos to arm and embed itself.

Summary

Countless times the claim has been made in the Arab media that the "Arab Spring" would bring about the demise of Al-Qaeda, by providing young people in the Arab world with an ideological alternative. However, it is dubious whether this claim stands the test of reality, for several reasons. First, participation in mass demonstrations is not inherent to the nature of Al-Qaeda. Second, a real ideological alternative to Al-Qaeda has yet to be formulated, such that it is impossible to know whether such an alternative will challenge Al-Qaeda's ideology. Third, even if a regime arises which is vehemently opposed to Al-Qaeda, it will have to establish and maintain a strong central government that can effectively counter the organization – a fundamental condition for weakening Al-Qaeda. The Iraqi experience teaches that intentions alone are insufficient.

Mashari Al-Thaidy, a columnist for *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, succinctly summed up the situation thus: "Voices in the Arab world and in the West have again and again stated, in more than one way, that the "Arab Spring" has heralded the end of Al-Qaeda's reign...Al-Qaeda, in the broad sense of the word "al-qaeda", is still functioning. Here it tries to take control of the Abyan region of Yemen; there, Western and other reports claim it is stealing weapons from Qaddafi's forces in Libya; and over there, it is fighting alongside Mauritania's forces in the Sahara Desert...in contrast to the cacophony of clichés about freedom, these organizations, and all those who believe in the rootedness of the Islamic and Jihadist solution, are finding that the widespread turmoil in Arab society is providing them with a golden opportunity to re-establish their bases, score

points, establish facts on the ground, or at least use this propitious hour to amass weapons, establish hiding places and military outposts, and do whatever else they need [to prepare for] for future action."²¹

²¹ Mashari Al-Thaidy, "Don't Spoil the Arab Festival", *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, July 8, 2011, <http://www.aawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&issueno=11910&article=630068> (Arabic).