

Is al Qaeda on the Wrong Side of History?

Written by Rohan Gunaratna

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ROHAN GUNARATNA, NOV 15 2011

The digital revolution empowered everyone. This included the terrorists and extremists, who sought to exploit the Internet to disseminate misinformation and disinformation. It also empowered ordinary citizens that wanted change in the Middle East. Citizen protests starting in June 2010, culminating in successful and unsuccessful revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Morocco, Jordan and throughout the Middle East. The Arabs repudiated and rejected violence to bring about socio-political change.

This shocked al Qaeda and its associated groups because their philosophy was to use violence to bring about change. Change in the Arab World ultimately came not from the much anticipated politico-religious forces employing insurgency, including terrorism. It came by street protests conducted by ordinary citizens. As opposed to a religious narrative calling the public to fight for faith, the pro-reform movements offered a nationalist and a democratic narrative. Both the peaceful revolts and the militant revolutions harnessed varying degrees of international goodwill and support.

Background:

Starting in Iran in June 2010, the Arab Spring had a profound impact in the region and beyond. Although most protests were relatively peaceful, such as the revolts that overthrew the presidents of Egypt and Tunisia in January 2011 and February 2011, the revolution that overthrew the president of Libya in August 2011 was a combination of protest and violence. The ground situation determined the method – peaceful protests, violence, or a combination.

Change in the Middle East was not linked to religion, but the Islamists were elated and celebrated it. Claiming that there was an upsurge of “mujahidin activity” throughout the Middle East, the Islamists rated the new regimes as weak compared to the well-established regimes that governed for 30 years.

The world is still likely in an early phase of a series of revolts and revolutions. They seek to change the political and security landscape of the Middle East and beyond. While most attempts at rebellion did not succeed, the successful cases are inspiring hope for the future! Even in far away India, the world’s largest democracy, the Arab Spring caught the attention of the Kashmiri youth.

The Impact on al Qaeda:

Al Qaeda was created in Peshawar, Pakistan on August 11, 1988. At its very foundation, al Qaeda wanted to replace corrupt Muslim regimes and false Muslim rulers and expel invaders of Muslim lands. For ten long years, al Qaeda worked with likeminded groups to silently built a state-of-the-art network that would take on the world. On August 7, 1998, al Qaeda mounted coordinated, simultaneous attacks on US embassies in Africa. To hurt the US and engage it in a confrontation, al Qaeda’s aim was to strike inside the US homeland.

Starting with al Qaeda’s iconic attacks in the US on September 11, 2001, al Qaeda and its associated groups emerged as the most dangerous terrorist and insurgent network the world had ever seen. A by-product of the anti-Soviet multinational Afghan campaign, al Qaeda, directed local groups and inspired cells worldwide. Until the Arab Spring of 2010, the al Qaeda-led Global Jihad Movement dominated the news in the Muslim World. Although this

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Movement still poses a long-term and a worldwide threat, the momentum of the Arab Spring diminished al Qaeda's importance and significance in the Arab World. The Arabs and, to a certain extent, the Muslims, are convinced that change in the Middle East and in Asia will not come through the barrel of the gun. Many have begun to question if al Qaeda, the vanguard of the Movement, was on the wrong side of history?

The Future:

Where insurgency and terrorism failed, mass protests may have succeeded. Outside support was useful, but they were largely indigenous. al Qaeda and its associated groups and inspired cells failed to topple the Middle Eastern autocracies and dictatorships for three decades, the Arab Spring that received covert and overt Western support succeeded. While some saw the Arab Spring as a gift from Allah to al Qaeda, others saw it as a gift from Obama to Osama.

Until the Arab Spring, Middle Eastern governments were confident, well equipped, and prepared to deal with violent movements. In return for their invaluable cooperation to fight al Qaeda and their associated groups, the West, especially the US, supported them. With the West supporting pro-reform movements and distancing itself from the Middle Eastern regimes, the Middle Eastern governments are in a bind. Arguing that the Arab Spring will not favour Western, including US interests, an al Qaeda ideologue, Anwar Awlaki, pointed out that the U.S. had abandoned Mubarak, the most important counter terrorism ally in the Middle East.

Realizing the potential of these movements for enflaming countries and replacing regimes, the dictators and autocrats of the Middle East are still grappling with how to manage such movements. They are considering a range of tools – using brute force to engagement strategies and adhering to the principles of using minimum force. Not only governments but opposition movements, radical and violent, are still trying to make sense.

Conclusion:

What is ironic is the Arab Spring's impact on the Global Jihad Movement. Al Qaeda, its associated groups and home-grown cells are no longer the agents of change. In the eyes of the people, this most powerful grouping of violent entities remains marginalized and no longer occupies the centre stage. With Islamists joining secularists to topple the long established regimes, al Qaeda lost control. The sweeping changes in the Middle East took away not only a faction of their supporters and sympathizers, but captured the reservoir of its potential support base.

Before his death, Osama Bin Laden, al Qaeda's founder and Dr. Ayman al Zawahiri, al Qaeda's incumbent leader, tried to fathom the people-power behind the Arab Spring. With the intention of harnessing its forces for their own advantage, they tried to implement new plans, strategies, and policies both in real and in cyber space. In the next decade, the thinking and conduct of al Qaeda, its associated groups and home-grown cells will be very different! They are likely to operate both above-ground and underground. They are likely to penetrate existing and new political parties and social organizations. They are likely to project themselves as men of peace willing to work with others. They realized the limits of guns and bombs to bring about change!

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