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# **Al-Qaeda at the Crossroads:** How the terror group is responding to the loss of its leaders & the Arab Spring

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Shiraz Maher & Peter R Neumann

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### **Editorial Assistants**

*Katie Rothman*

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### **Editor**

*Jeni Mitchell*

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### **Contact**

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ICSR

King's College London

138–142 Strand

London WC2R 1HH

United Kingdom

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# Introduction

*There is a perception in some quarters that the terrorist threat to this country [Great Britain] has evaporated. Bin Laden is dead, Al Qaida's senior leadership in Pakistan is under serious pressure and there hasn't been a major attack here for seven years. That is all true. But we need to look more closely at what has actually been going on.*

**Jonathan Evans, Director-General of the Security Service, Address at the Lord Mayor's Annual Defence and Security Lecture, Mansion House, City of London, 25 June 2012**

**T**he future of al-Qaeda is in the balance. The killing of Osama Bin Laden may have been the pivotal point at which the group's troubles became evident, but it was not the cause of the problems from which it now suffers. Instead, it has been engulfed by a series of far greater challenges, including the decimation of its leadership corps and the Arab Spring. This paper explores the debate about where al-Qaeda now finds itself and its possible future trajectory.

Over the last two years, the United States has successfully targeted and killed a number of key al-Qaeda leaders through drone strikes. The effect has been arresting. Among the first high-profile targets was Mustafa abu al-Yazid, an Egyptian al-Qaeda operative largely credited with managing the group's relationship with the Taliban. He was killed in May 2010 in Pakistan, emboldening the American administration's view of the utility of drones. About ten core leaders have been subsequently killed, including Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, Abu Hafs al-Shahri, Samir Khan, Anwar al-Awlaki, and Abu Yahya al-Libi. The loss of these leaders – often in quick succession – has placed the group at a crossroads. Will it endure? Can it survive? And, if so, how?

The targeted killing of al-Qaeda leaders has certainly rocked the group and significantly affected its operational capabilities. That is not to say it is finished. Political instability in the Greater Middle East has weakened the organisation while simultaneously presenting it with new opportunities. By analysing the content on forums linked to al-Qaeda – and by juxtaposing this with the writings of alternative leadership figures, such as Ayman al-Zawahiri – this paper offers a broader interpretation of al-Qaeda’s strategy at this critical juncture in its history.

The death of leadership figures, in itself, has done little to severely undermine the essentialist nature of the group’s basic ideology. However, its strategic future is likely to be increasingly shaped by events which seem beyond its control: namely, political transformation across the Middle East. Thus far, al-Qaeda has proved adept at offering an analysis of the Arab Spring which restores its own centrality to events, but this has been much harder to achieve in practice. However agile its narrative, its response to changes in the global political scene speaks of an organisation which is losing momentum and trying to contort itself to events which have taken it by surprise. It remains to be seen whether al-Qaeda can re-insert itself into the picture as vanguard or participant – and its prospects will vary dramatically from country to country. It also remains to be seen how Islamists operating within constitutional and democratic frameworks in countries like Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya will react to al-Qaeda’s kindred overtures.

This is the context within which this paper seeks to explore al-Qaeda’s future. On the one hand, the loss of its leaders has squeezed the group. Revolutions across the Middle East have provided further strategic complications for al-Qaeda while also presenting it with new opportunities. The group’s response to these near-term challenges will determine its future trajectory.

# The role of leaders and ideology

Islamist movements tend to weather the loss of their leaders with unusual resilience, partly due to their grounding in a doctrinaire and ideological vision. Basing their movement around an idea, rather than a specific personality or leader, provides a dexterity which often outlives individuals and helps enable a near-seamless transition. For the jihadist network, when one leader is killed the rest of the organisation simply carries on. Consider the eulogy of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the former leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, who was killed in June 2006:

*They [American Armed Forces] think that we fight for money and prestige—and what they do not understand is that our arteries are filled with the ideology of jihad. Even if they managed to reach Zarqawi, praise be to Allah, we have a million more Zarqawis because our Ummah is the Ummah of jihad and jihad is at the top of our religious hierarchy.<sup>1</sup>*

This is typical hyperbole, though also reflective of the group's beliefs. Similarly, when Osama bin Laden was killed by American Special Forces, al-Qaeda reaffirmed the enduring ideological aspect of its message:

*Are the Americans able to kill what Sheikh Osama lived and fought for, even with all their soldiers, intelligence, and agencies? Never! Never! Sheikh Osama did not build an organisation that would die with him, nor would end with him.<sup>2</sup>*

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1 'Biography of Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi' posted on 16/7/2009 on the Ansar al-Mujahideen Forum. Accessed at: <http://ansar1.info/showthread.php?t=9579>

2 Translation produced by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, available at: <http://icsr.info/news/attachments/1304701772AQ.pdf>

Shortly after bin Laden's death one participant on the Ansar al-Mujahideen Forum called Abu Mus'ab affirmed that 'those who fought for shaykh usaamah, know that shaykh usaamah has passed away, but those who fought for Allaah, know that Allaah is alive and will never die'.<sup>3</sup> Another user, Salmakh84, put it in more pithy terms: 'we were not fighting for Osama. We were fighting for Allah. The Jihad will continue even if the Amir is Shaheed [martyred]!!'<sup>4</sup>

The death of Anwar al-Awlaki, a prominent figure in al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), also provoked the group to declare that 'America has killed Sheikh Anwar, may Allah have mercy on him, but they can never kill his ideology'.<sup>5</sup>

While ideas cannot be killed through conventional military tactics, there is obvious utility in removing those who can most persuasively communicate and sell those ideas. This is one area where the targeted killing of al-Qaeda's leadership has been somewhat effective. For example, the loss of Anwar al-Awlaki is a clear blow to the organisation. Eloquent, charismatic and engaging, he quickly established himself as one of al-Qaeda's most effective communicators in the English language, inspiring and directing scores of terrorist attacks. Yet, although the messenger is gone, the message itself endures.

An authoritative study produced by the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point, *the Militant Ideology Atlas: Research Compendium*, presents empirical evidence of the most downloaded, read and saved jihadi materials.<sup>6</sup> It reveals that of the top twenty most downloaded jihadi books, three were authored by Abdullah Azzam, who died

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- 3 'Sheikh Usama bin Laden reported shaheed (Insha'Allah) by the kuffar' posted on 2/5/2011 on the Ansar al-Mujahideen Forum. Accessed at: <http://www.ansar1.info/showthread.php?p=118185#post118185>
  - 4 'Sheikh Usama bin Laden reported shaheed (Insha'Allah) by the kuffar' posted on 2/5/2011 on the Ansar al-Mujahideen Forum. Accessed at: <http://www.ansar1.info/showthread.php?p=118173#post118173>
  - 5 'The Blood of the Martyr is Light and Fire; A Statement about the Martyrdom of Sheikh Anwar Al-Awlaqi and His Comrades', posted on the Ansar al-Mujahideen Forum, accessed at: <http://ansar1.info/showthread.php?t=36355>
  - 6 Will McCants and Jarret Brachman, *Militant Ideology Atlas: Research Compendium*, Combating Terrorism Center, U.S. Military Academy (2006)

in 1989, more than a decade before 9/11. His ideological relevance to the global jihad movement has clearly outlived him. The same is true of Awlaki, whose speeches continue to be easily accessible online. More significantly, the CTC report reveals that neither Osama bin Laden nor his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, are particularly important ideological figureheads.<sup>7</sup> Of the 120 documents examined by the CTC report, only three references are attributed to Osama bin Laden. These relate to a speech he delivered on the topic of jihadi methodology which was later transcribed and divided into three sections – meaning the three references to him only relate to one speech.

The primary role of leaders like bin Laden and Zawahiri was to serve as figureheads, rallying supporters and providing symbolic inspiration for jihad. That is not a task associated with any single leader, and the global jihad movement has produced a carousel of characters who have served this purpose. What matters, perhaps more than the individuals themselves, is the circumstances in which they operate. This has certainly been the case over the last eighteen months when much of the Middle East and North Africa has been rocked by a wave of unprecedented political unrest.

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7 Ibid.



# The Arab Spring

## Claiming credit

While al-Qaeda can insulate itself against the loss of leaders, it remains exposed to the force of events. The spontaneous wave of revolutions which swept through parts of the Arab world took everyone by surprise. 'No one saw it [the Arab Spring] coming from Tunisia', Anwar al-Awlaki confessed. 'But then when it came from Tunisia, no one saw it happening in Egypt'.<sup>8</sup> There was much for al-Qaeda to celebrate in these revolutions. After all, the group had long dedicated itself to removing supposedly 'apostate' regimes which had previously arrested and oppressed them. 'A generation of youth was able to show the modern world what they could do, despite all efforts of these corrupt Arab regimes to spoil and sedate the youth at all levels', wrote Attiya Allah al-Libi. 'It seemed as if I could hear the bones of the old decrepit Pharaoh, Hosni Mubarak, breaking'.<sup>9</sup> This would set the tone for jihadist efforts to claim credit for the revolutions.

The problem for al-Qaeda was that its own people had played no actual role in the unfolding revolutions. This was not for want of trying. As early as 2007, Ayman al-Zawahiri had called for a popular uprising in Egypt of the very kind that succeeded in unseating Mubarak. He told his audience:

*If every street from whose residents someone was tortured was to rise up and demonstrate and besiege the police station to get the detainee out; if every college or institute from which a student was arrested was to stage a sit-in and boycott classes and request the rest of the students in the university to join them; if every village from which a young man was kidnapped was to besiege the police station; and if the imam of every mosque from*

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8 Anwar al-Awlaki, 'The tsunami of change', *Inspire Magazine*, Issue 5, Spring 2011.

9 Attiya Allah al-Libi, 'The people's revolt, the fall of the corrupt Arab regime, the demolition of the idol of stability, and the New Beginning' (Dar al-Murabiteen Publications)

*whose attendees someone was arrested was to request the worshipers to demonstrate against the police station, these beasts would think a thousand times before biting us one by one.*

*If the unions, universities, factories and mosques were to rise up and take to the streets in mass protest, the government would give in. They are able to kidnap us one by one, but they won't be able to face a mass wave of resentment and anger.<sup>10</sup>*

Egyptians did not respond to Zawahiri's brand of incitement. Instead, popular protests were largely peaceful and eschewed terrorism. Protesters framed their demands in the vernacular of libertarian ideals – freedom, accountability and the rule of law – and rejected Islamist slogans. There was no open hostility to the United States, nor was there any burning of Israeli flags in the streets of Cairo or Tripoli. The momentum appeared to have shifted decisively away from al-Qaeda, a suggestion that infuriated Zawahiri. 'The American-allied media claims that al-Qaeda's methodology in confronting the [Arab] regimes has failed', he said. 'But that media pretentiously forgets that al-Qaeda and most of the jihadist groups have continued their efforts for more than a decade and a half, setting aside confronting these regimes, and focusing instead on attacking the head of international crime [America]'.<sup>11</sup>

In order to rebut these claims Zawahiri made three arguments. The first asked Arabs to look beyond the immediate chain of events that initially triggered the revolutions. Yes, the Tunisian revolution may have been sparked by Mohamed Bouazizi, the street vendor whose desperate self-immolation set the entire Arab world on fire and precipitated the departure of Ben Ali. Zawahiri did not deny that Egyptian grievances and anger spilt over into action after the extra-judicial killing of Khaled Said and the government's subsequent cover-up. But these events were just triggers, not causes, Zawahiri insisted. To understand

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10 Ayman al-Zawahiri, 'The advice of one concerned' (As-Sahab Media, 2007)

11 Ayman al-Zawahiri, 'Dawn of the imminent victory' (As-Sahab media), 12 September 2011

why such seemingly isolated events turned into mass uprisings, and why Western governments were so quick to abandon their long-standing allies, Zawahiri argued that one needs to understand the broader political context in which they occurred.

Second, Zawahiri claimed that al-Qaeda campaigns had given people in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere the confidence needed to rise up against their leaders. He argued that it was al-Qaeda's opposition to the corruption of Arab regimes that had provided the 'vanguard of resistance' and had first drawn attention to the injustices perpetrated by those governments. Thus, al-Qaeda had not only educated people about the need for revolution, but had also demonstrated that resistance would eventually succeed. 'The annihilation of the Americans in Afghanistan and Iraq acts as strength and support for our people who are uprising against the corrupt and idolatrous tyrants', he argued.<sup>12</sup> These supposed successes of the jihadist campaign 'helped in causing a popular, cumulative movement and mobilization that led to the explosion of the popular volcano'.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, Zawahiri claimed that the popular revolutions could only succeed because al-Qaeda attacks on the United States had undermined the relationship between Middle Eastern rulers and their sponsors in the West. Al-Qaeda has long argued that seemingly weak, despotic regimes in the Arab world have only endured for so long because of the support they receive from Western governments. By the mid-1990s, al-Qaeda and allied groups had decided to stop confronting the 'near enemy' and instead focused their strategic priorities on targeting the 'far enemy', represented by the United States. If America could be coerced into abandoning its Middle Eastern allies, they reasoned, then rulers like Mubarak would be easily toppled. To Zawahiri's mind, this is precisely what transpired during the Arab Spring. 'The abandonment of America's allies one by one is the fallout of its diminishing pride and arrogance after receiving the blows in New York, Washington, and

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12 Ayman al-Zawahiri, 'A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Part 5' (As-Sahab Media)

13 Ayman al-Zawahiri, 'Dawn of the imminent victory' (As-Sahab media), 12 September 2011

Pennsylvania', Zawahiri argued.<sup>14</sup> The 9/11 attacks had 'directly caused America to lose influence over the [Arab] people because its grasp over the [Arab] regimes was weakened'.<sup>15</sup> In another address he claimed:

*[Y]our brother Mujahideen are with you, confronting the same enemy. They have stood up to face America and its western allies, who have cast Hosni Mubarak, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Ali Abdullah Saleh, Abdullah bin Husain and their likes over you. Indeed the change in the American policy of supporting these despotic tyrants and to attempt to deal directly with the Muslim masses with their deceptive politics and soft power is a direct result of the blessed attacks on New York, Washington and Pennsylvania. Since then, America and the rest of the West has rethought their policies.*<sup>16</sup>

This analysis, with its tenuous chain of causation, failed to find much attraction. Yet the experience in Egypt and Tunisia also revealed that these countries are not moving towards liberal democracy at any great pace. Instead, Islamist parties made notable political gains, prompting al-Qaeda to adopt a different approach. Instead of attempting to rewrite history, it pursued kindred outreach, in the hope of receiving a sympathetic response from incoming Islamist administrations. The only exception to this has been in Libya where Islamist parties did not achieve the kinds of gains they would have hoped to. Nonetheless, al-Qaeda has also directed a series of communiqués to jihadists in Libya, hoping to enlist their support.

## Kindred outreach

Islamist groups found themselves best placed to capitalise on the revolutionary impulse that swept through North Africa. The Ennahda Party took power in Tunisia, while the Muslim Brotherhood took Egypt's presidency. This presents an

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14 Ayman al-Zawahiri, 'A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Part 5' (As-Sahab Media)

15 Ibid.

16 Ayman al-Zawahiri, 'A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Part 4' (As-Sahab Media)

opportunity for al-Qaeda. From its perspective, it proved the revolutions were Islamic in dimension and not about democratic or liberal ideals at all. According to Attiya Allah al-Libi, 'Whether by the might of the mighty, or by the humiliation of the ignoble, regardless of whether people like it or not... Islam is making a new comeback'.<sup>17</sup> Al-Qaeda saw an opportunity to become part of the new political order. This requires it to demonstrate a greater degree of pragmatism than it has previously, in the hope of engaging other Islamist groups.

It has been an uphill battle. Al-Qaeda has typically engaged in caustic criticism of other Islamist movements, while many of the latter have come to view the terrorist group's methods as counter-productive and outmoded. Traditionally, al-Qaeda has criticised non-violent Islamist groups for participating within the democratic process and has even been drawn into a war of words with Hamas for its political posturing in Gaza.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Ayman al-Zawahiri himself wrote a damning criticism of the Muslim Brotherhood in *The Bitter Harvest*, where he lambasted the group's methodology.<sup>19</sup>

There was no need for engagement before the Arab Spring. After all, al-Qaeda considers itself the vanguard of the Muslim nation, fighting its battles and challenging its enemies. The Arab Spring changed everything. Al-Qaeda's approach was no longer sustainable. To influence the newly emerging political order, the group had to first find ways of engaging Islamist actors on the ground in the new Middle East. Attiya Allah al-Libi appealed to Libyan rebels in unusually concessionary and kindred terms:

*I wish to clarify something to my brothers and sisters everywhere, with all due respect for the trust and love they have for us, which is that al-Qaeda does not have a 'magic wand'...al-Qaeda is only a small part of this striving and Mujahid Ummah. Do not overestimate it. We should all know our abilities, and let us aid each*

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17 Attiya Allah al-Libi, 'A tribute to our fellow Muslims in Libya' (Dar al-Murabiteen Publications)

18 Lydia Khalil, 'Al Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood', *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor*, 23 March 2006.

19 Ayman al-Zawahiri, *The Bitter Harvest* (unpublished)

*other in piousness, righteousness and in making Jihad in the way of Allah, everyone according to his place and role, with whatever they can and is proper for them.*<sup>20</sup>

Even more important for al-Qaeda was to effect a rapprochement with the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Libi continued:

*We call the youth to understand matters properly, and not to be short-sighted, paralysed, or hasty. There is no need to indulge in differences about the various Islamic movements which may differ from them, like the brothers of the Nahdah party in Tunis for example, or others. Rather, they should start by focusing on construction and preparation [of Muslim unity]. The same applies to the brothers in Egypt, Sinai, Rafah and others. Let kindness and good manners, and tolerance of people's various differences lead you.*<sup>21</sup>

This approach was far from universally accepted within al-Qaeda, but the fact that its senior leaders were prepared to make such overtures demonstrates the extent to which the group has been overtaken by events.

## What can al-Qaeda offer?

The question is, what can al-Qaeda offer its Islamist contemporaries in the Middle East? Islamist groups entering the political process after years of oppression would have little to gain by allying themselves with al-Qaeda, which continues to pursue terrorist means over political ones. In an attempt to recalibrate the order, Zawahiri has argued that Muslim countries in the Middle East face an ongoing threat from America's desire to subjugate Muslims. President Obama, he insisted, would do everything he could to ensure that 'power is safely transferred to a government which has the same policies as Mubarak in regards to fighting Islam, guaranteeing the security of Israel, blockading Gaza, and serving American

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20 Attiya Allah al-Libi, 'The people's revolt, the fall of the corrupt Arab regime, the demolition of the idol of stability, and the New Beginning' (Dar al-Murabiteen Publications)

21 Ibid.

interests'.<sup>22</sup> Al-Qaeda would guard against this eventuality, he argued. Such approaches have not generated any serious sympathy among Egyptian members of the Muslim Brotherhood, although Zawahiri's posturing is instructive in two ways. The first is his effort to suggest that al-Qaeda has common cause with the Brotherhood against a common enemy: the United States. The second is the ongoing extent of his myopia, in the form of his enduring belief that only al-Qaeda is capable of preserving the 'essence' of the revolution.

Hoping to broaden the appeal of al-Qaeda's outreach, Abu Suhail, a seasoned jihadist from Yemen, attempted to capitalise on anti-Israeli sentiments in the region.<sup>23</sup> Writing in al-Qaeda's *Inspire* magazine, he told readers that the group's method of 'resistance' had demonstrated the need for popular uprising and rebellion. Striving for unity, he argued that now is the time for all Islamist groups to coalesce and march on Jerusalem. He told readers:

*If this Egyptian revolution has taught us anything, it has taught us that sitting and waiting for tyrants to fall is not practical; mobilization of the people is necessary for the tyrants to give in. This is what your brothers in the al Qaeda Organization...have been working for: inspiring the people all over the world to rise up for the Islamic cause of eliminating the tyrants so that we have a clear shot at Israel. It is a collective effort that requires the ummah to be on the same page.*<sup>24</sup>

In practical terms, this approach was also a failure. Al-Qaeda has never played a significant role in the Arab-Israeli conflict, nor do any of the principal Islamist actors feel there is anything to be gained by their participation. Again, Suhail's outreach is instructive in revealing the extent to which al-Qaeda is trying to assert itself into the framework of events that have otherwise left it behind.

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22 Ayman al-Zawahiri, 'A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Part 5' (As-Sahab Media)

23 Omar Nasiri, *Inside the Jihad: My Life with al-Qaeda, A Spy's Story* (2006), pp. 102, 141-144.

24 Abu Suhail, 'The Way Forward', *Inspire Magazine*, Issue 5, Spring 2011.

The most pragmatic assessment of how al-Qaeda might assert itself in the still unfurling aftermath of the Arab Spring was offered by Anwar al-Awlaki. In his view, it was of no importance whether the emerging governments were Islamic or secular, nor was it strictly necessary for al-Qaeda to embrace them. Greater freedom and instability in the region would inevitably provide jihadists with new opportunities to operate. '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', he argued. 'Whatever the outcome, 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'.<sup>25</sup> He also believed that ongoing instability would keep the American government busy and 'divert huge amounts of effort and money to cultivate a new breed of collaborators [in the Middle East]'.<sup>26</sup> In turn, this 'would be a great benefit for the mujahidin', who could then exploit the diversification of threats to the United States.<sup>27</sup>

No doubt, Awlaki's approach was the one most suited to the public mood at the time. The Arab Spring channelled Islamist sympathies into electoral politics, so that even Egypt's deeply conservative al-Nour party, which shares many of al-Qaeda's theological assumptions (though not its methods), decided to participate in elections – and did so with great success. As long as peaceful agitation and electoral participation could deliver results, there was no place for al-Qaeda's 'muscular' Islamism, which meant the group's appeals for partnership and collaboration fell on deaf ears. This only changed when the conflicts in Libya and, especially, Syria made it obvious that violent insurrection still had a role to play.

## Comeback?

The Arab Spring has unravelled the guarantee long promised by Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes: stability. In its place a series of uncertainties has emerged. Egypt appears locked in perpetual revolt, jihadists are empowered in Yemen, and

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25 Anwar al-Awlaki, 'The tsunami of change', *Inspire Magazine*, Issue 5, Spring 2011.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

Syria is spiralling into ever greater chaos. Jonathan Evans, Director-General of the Security Service (also known as MI5), has also expressed concern that ‘parts of the Arab world have once more become a permissive environment for Al Qaida’.<sup>28</sup>

The Arab Spring’s violent turn in Libya and Syria has provided al-Qaeda with an opportunity to insert itself back into the public consciousness – although with varying degrees of success. In principle, al-Qaeda supported the removal of the Libyan ruler Muammar Gaddafi, whose administration tortured and killed hundreds of jihadists. However, when NATO decided to intervene on behalf of the Libyan opposition, Zawahiri quickly denounced the mission and warned Libyans against supporting it. To his mind, NATO’s intervention represented yet another tool to subjugate Muslims:

*NATO is not a charitable foundation. They aim to destroy the corrupt regime of Gaddafi and replace it with a regime subordinate to them, through which they can steal the oil of Libya and its resources, forcing it to submit to their wants and policies.*<sup>29</sup>

In the end, even conservative and deeply religious Libyans welcomed the NATO campaign, because they realised that Gaddafi could not be toppled without Western support. For the time being, therefore, Libya seems like a lost opportunity, even if Zawahiri belatedly called for jihadists to establish safe havens in Libya.<sup>30</sup>

Yet, one of the unintended consequences of the revolution in Libya has been the empowering of Islamists in parts of the Sahel – most notably in northern Mali (an area the size of France). Light and heavy arms found their way into Mali after

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28 Address at the Lord Mayor’s Annual Defence and Security Lecture by the Director-General of the Security Service, Jonathan Evans (City of London, 25 June 2012). Available at: <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/output/the-olympics-and-beyond.html>

29 Ayman al-Zawahiri, ‘A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Part 6’ (As-Sahab Media)

30 See Nic Robertson and Paul Cruickshank, ‘Al Qaeda sends fighters to Libya’, *CNN*, 30 December 2011; available at <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2011/12/30/al-qaeda-sends-fighters-to-libya/>

the fall of Gaddafi partly because of his use of mercenaries to quash the uprising in its early phases. In particular, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) have benefited from the post-Gaddafi fallout. A number of significant al-Qaeda leaders have also emerged in this region in recent years, not least Fazul Abdullah Mohammed who led the group's operations in East Africa and was indicted in the United States in relation to the 1998 Twin Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania.<sup>31</sup>

Political instability in Yemen has also strengthened al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), particularly in the north-western provinces of the country where the central government is unable to assert itself. This raises the spectre of an Islamist corridor along the Sahel, spreading from Yemen, to East Africa, and across to Mali. Compared to the 'AfPak' region, this space remains largely ungoverned and unknown to U.S. military forces, making it potentially very challenging in the future.

However, the situation in Syria could yet turn out to be the most advantageous for al-Qaeda. Not only has the initially peaceful uprising turned into a protracted, violent confrontation, but there is also a strong sectarian and/or religious dimension to the conflict. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is not just a secular dictator like Mubarak and Ben Ali; his family and much of his inner circle are Alawis, a Shia sect widely regarded as heretical by Sunni extremists like al-Qaeda. In the course of their brutal campaign, Assad's forces have regularly taunted Sunni traditions and launched numerous attacks against mosques that serve as rallying points for the largely Sunni opposition.<sup>32</sup> None of this has escaped the attention of al-Qaeda and associated groups, which have framed the conflict in religious terms. Indeed, Jonathan Evans now baldly asserts that 'al-Qaida is active

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31 [www.flhsmv.gov/fhp/misc/wanted/Mohammed.pdf](http://www.flhsmv.gov/fhp/misc/wanted/Mohammed.pdf)

32 For examples of this see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QqprJ01JJ7Q>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KYxBElg6d-o>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPfrDGNTsy0>

in Syria'.<sup>33</sup> Hussein bin Mahmud, one of al-Qaeda's spiritual leaders, told fellow jihadists that victory belonged to the 'Mujahideen who support the truth and stand up.... [against] the apostate and disbelieving [Alawi]'.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, a breakaway faction of al-Qaeda in Iraq, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, called on Syrians to remain 'steadfast.... against the blows of the tyrant and his deviant sect which has departed far from the fold of Islam'.<sup>35</sup>

The extent to which al-Qaeda has become part of the conflict remains unclear. There have been reports of foreign jihadists in Syria, and Assad's government frequently blames attacks on the group (along with foreign terrorists). There can be no doubt that al-Qaeda in Iraq – the group's most sectarian affiliate – would relish an opportunity to engage Assad's forces. At the same time, Zawahiri has not yet addressed the issue with as much vigor as might have been expected. Compared to the leader's enthusiastic overtures to the Egyptian people (he has issued no fewer than nine addresses aimed at them), Syria has not featured as prominently in any of his statements, messages or lectures – a fact that has accentuated the belief that he may be too Egypt-centric to lead a global organisation.

From al-Qaeda's point of view, failing to take advantage of the situation in Syria would represent yet another lost opportunity. As long as the international community refuses to intervene openly and members of the Free Syrian Army fail to make substantial progress, al-Qaeda might yet generate goodwill and respect among Sunni Arabs by launching an Iraq-style insurgency against Assad's forces. Indeed, this could be the only way in which the group might capitalise on the Arab Spring and, in doing so, maintain its relevance.

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33 Address at the Lord Mayor's Annual Defence and Security Lecture by the Director-General of the Security Service, Jonathan Evans (City of London, 25 June 2012). Available at: <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/output/the-olympics-and-beyond.html>

34 Hussein bin Mahmud, 'Damascus- the Base of Jihad on Earth' (Dar al-Murabiteen Publications). Taken from: <http://ansar1.info/showthread.php?t=32390>

35 'A Statement of Congratulations to the Ummah on the occasion of the blessed Eid al-Fitr', The Abdullah Azzam Brigades. Taken from the Ansar al-Mujahideen Forum: (<http://www.ansar1.info/showthread.php?t=35798>)

If al-Qaeda can achieve this, it will compliment the group's modest gains across the Sahel and in Yemen, where they are already bossing a limited amount of terrain as a result of the Arab Spring. With increased political instability in Yemen the group's most potent chapter, AQAP, certainly has the ability to operate freely and plan operations against the West. However, Syria will still present the greatest opportunity for long-term success for the group, particularly if its border with Iraq becomes increasingly porous and ungoverned. Indeed, indications already point to a resurgence of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) following the American withdrawal last December. If the group strengthens its foothold there, then Syria will almost certainly feature high up its list of priorities.

# Conclusion

**A**l-Qaeda is at a crossroads. It is clear that the loss of its leaders has rocked the group slightly, but it has also been overtaken by events which now leave it fighting for relevance. Al-Qaeda had nothing to do with the overthrow of rulers like Mubarak and Ben Ali, and has struggled to make sense of the situation:

- First, it tried to construct an 'alternative narrative' that gave jihadists a more prominent role.
- When this narrative failed to gain traction and the Islamic character of the uprisings became more obvious, al-Qaeda reached out to other Islamists. Though pragmatic and less doctrinaire than its previous approaches, this outreach was largely unsuccessful. Al-Qaeda had nothing to offer in an era in which it seemed as if Islamist objectives could be achieved through constitutional means.
- Where popular revolutions in places like Libya and Syria have evolved into violent conflicts, al-Qaeda has tried to exploit the situation. So far, however, it has failed to capitalise fully on what may be its only opportunity to maintain a degree of relevance despite limited gains in Yemen and the Sahel.

The Middle East, North Africa and the Horn of Africa now represent the best chance of revival for the group. Jonathan Evans confirmed that '[w]hereas a few years ago 75% of the priority casework addressed by my Service had some sort of Pakistan and/or Afghanistan dimension...that figure has reduced and now stands at less than 50%'.<sup>36</sup> This suggests that al-Qaeda in that region is largely in decline, after suffering numerous setbacks. Weakened in Central Asia,

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36 Address at the Lord Mayor's Annual Defence and Security Lecture by the Director-General of the Security Service, Jonathan Evans (City of London, 25 June 2012). Available at: <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/output/the-olympics-and-beyond.html>

and presented with opportunities for resurgence in the Middle East, al-Qaeda's prospects hang in the balance. Its future trajectory will depend on the strategic choices it makes now.



## About ICSR

ICSR is a unique partnership of King's College London, the University of Pennsylvania, Georgetown University, the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya (Israel) and the Regional Center for Conflict Prevention at the Jordan Institute of Diplomacy. Its aim and mission is to bring together knowledge and leadership to counter the growth of radicalisation and political violence. For more information, see [www.icsr.info](http://www.icsr.info)



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