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Al-Qaeda and its prospects after the Arab revolutions

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Introduction

The popular uprisings in Tunisia last December triggered what we now call the Arab Spring, the Arab Revolutions or the Arab Awakening. Since then, the fear that "al-Qaeda" or "terrorists" will use the political turmoil to their advantage – and even seize power – has been expressed in different ways by U.S. politicians, journalists and even some threatened Arab leaders. Indeed, during the prolonged Libyan conflict, suspicions of connections between the rebels and al-Qaeda have been voiced both by Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi as well as by NATO's Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, Admiral Stavridis, who has testified to the Senate Armed Service Committee that "flickers in the intelligence of potential al-Qaeda" and other terrorist groups among the rebels.

But is it really likely that al-Qaeda can find a convenient bandwagon in revolutions that are, on the whole, secular in character, or that political turmoil in itself leads to terrorism? And can the Libyan rebels be placed on the same footing as the organization that killed thousands of people in the United States on September 11, 2001? And, if the civil unrest does spawn terrorism, who would it target – the populations of the Middle East and North Africa, or of Western capitals?

The possible relationship between these revolutions and terrorism is, naturally, a very complex question, and perhaps one that cannot be given a clear and comprehensive answer. What can be done, however, is to break it down into a number of smaller, more concrete issues. Even these may ultimately prove too complex to solve, but they can at least help us analyze the global, regional and local security implications of the revolts.

The purpose of this paper is to attempt such a breakdown. By separating and discussing different types of terrorism, as well as different meanings of al-Qaeda, two relevant categories of political violence, as well as their security implications, are discussed. The hope is that these categories might contribute to a more informed and structured discussion and analysis of violence and security in the context of the Arab spring. Tentative implications for NATO are also advanced.

What we are talking about

Firstly we need to ask ourselves what we actually mean by al-Qaeda and terrorism, because definitions have conspicuously shifted during the last ten years.

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Terrorism and terrorists

The numerous definitions available might suggest that terrorism is a readily defined phenomenon. At the same time, the very range of proposed definitions shows how hard it is to reach agreement on the matter. This conceptual disarray is related to a number of issues that are not easily resolved.

Firstly, the term "terrorist" is highly subjective. An old cliché says that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. Secondly, the term is condemnatory. It is used rhetorically to label adversaries in such a way as to justify certain legal or other measures against them. And thirdly, the very concept of terrorism is ambiguous, in that there is considerable disagreement on what precisely it refers to. While most theorists agree that terrorism is a *method*, there is still great dispute over whether it is the character of the act, the target of the act, or the status of the perpetrator that should determine what constitutes terrorism and what does not.

As a result of this conceptual confusion, the terms "terrorism" and "terrorist" lose much of their analytical utility. And, as a result of their popularity and convenience, manifestations of political violence which should be kept quite distinct tend to become inappropriately bracketed together.

The "real" al-Qaeda and its affiliates

There are also severe ambiguities in how we talk about al-Qaeda. There are numerous explanations for the genesis of the name, but a common denominator is the Afghan resistance to the Soviet occupation during the 1980's. Despite bin Laden's quite clearly stated goals in the mid 1990s, and the subsequent attacks against U.S. targets[2], the organization was virtually unknown outside certain professional circuits before 9/11. That of course has changed dramatically. Over the last decade al-Qaeda has come to mean anything from a core group of Salafist terrorists who try to direct terrorist operations from their hide-outs in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region, to a loosely knit network of groups and cells that carry out terrorist attacks globally – and ultimately, according to some commentators, a movement or even a mere idea. Increasingly, too, insurgents in the Afghan and Iraqi theaters of operation are referred to as al-Qaeda.

Today, most analysts and governments tend to separate the different groups that are believed to be part of this network. The U.S. State Department's list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO), as well as the equivalent lists of the EU and the UN, separate al-Qaeda from al-Qaeda *affiliates*. From this perspective, al-Qaeda means the *core* organization around the late Osama bin Laden, with a geographical foothold in Pakistan and previously in Afghanistan. The size, boundary and whereabouts of this core are not clear, as shown by the recent raid on bin Laden's compound. The core is also the part of the network that has been under intense U.S. pressure during the last decade. This core's ability to lead and influence activities of terrorism and other types of violence is believed to have been gradually eroded, but its organization and operations do reflect continuing engagement in the planning – or at least the conception – of terrorist attacks on a global scale, as shown by the findings of the raid on bin Laden's refuge.

The *al-Qaeda affiliates* are, in general, local terrorist groups or rebel groups, often pre-dating al-Qaeda itself. The traditional business of the affiliates is the local or regional struggle against the so-called "near enemy", the apostate regimes that govern many Muslim populations in the MENA region and elsewhere. What bin Laden did in the 90s was to channel al-Qaeda into the "far enemy strategy", i.e. attacking the U.S. and other powers that interfered in the MENA region on their home ground. Affiliates deal with this strategic issue in different ways, which means that the many groups we tend to group together collectively as al-Qaeda are really very different. Some of them "join" the al-Qaeda network to gain prominence but stay focused on their own, local agenda[3], while others broaden their agenda to include the global strategy of the core[4].

The varying patterns of affiliation and motivation have consequences for the core's ability to lead and direct, and hence its ability to carry out terrorist attacks on the global scene: since 9/11, the core has become

[2] The 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya, and the 2000 attack against the destroyer USS Cole in Yemen.

[3] e.g. the Algerian guerilla group *Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat*, GSPC[3], that changed its name to *al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb*, AQIM, in 2006 but still operates only in Algeria.

[4] e.g. the Yemen- and Saudi-based groups that merged into *al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula*, AQAP, in 2009, and were behind the so-called Detroit Plot of that year and the cargo plane plot of 2010.

increasingly dependent on its affiliates for operational freedom. The ways in which the core affiliates local and regional terrorist and guerilla groups can be compared to organic growth in the business sector. By "acquiring" existing, local fighters, the global movement can be made to look as if it is expanding. Not only do its operational reach and capacity increase, but it also gains greater support.

A third and more complicated part of the al-Qaeda network is the role of what are sometimes called *cells*. These are "home grown terrorists", members of *diasporas* living in Western countries and "radicalized" to such an extent that they commit terrorist attacks there. The perpetrators of the London bombings in July 2005, predominantly of Pakistani descent, serve as an example. Relationships between these cells and the core also vary greatly. Some cells are believed to have been trained and directed by the core, while others are believed to act wholly of their own initiative in the spirit of al-Qaeda.

These different goals, and the different levels of priority that the groups give to local, regional, and global action, make for an internal contradiction that could ultimately break up the network. Managing this contradiction is a paramount task of the al-Qaeda core.

Having separated the various actors that we sometimes group together under the same label, we should be able to classify a few types of political violence that these groups are involved in, as well as relate them to the Arab revolutions and examine their implications for NATO and its members.

The risks of terrorism and other forms of political violence

The two main types of political violence that could constitute immediate security issues for NATO and its member states are global terror campaigns and insurrections or resistance to occupation[5].

Global attacks – the "far enemy" strategy

The security threat which is probably of most concern to the politicians and journalists mentioned at the beginning of this paper is vulnerability to terrorist attacks on Western soil or against Western targets elsewhere. These are the kinds of attack that the al-Qaeda core aims for in its "far enemy" strategy. In military terms it is an indirect approach, since it does not attack the enemy's main force but goes around it.

The *al-Qaeda core's* capability of mounting such attacks is severely limited after years of unrelenting U.S. pressure, but it maintains this option through some of its affiliates. The risk of global attacks, then, can be analyzed through two main factors: the rationale and capability of the al-Qaeda affiliates, and the general conditions for conducting global terrorist campaigns in the wake of the Arab Spring.

Rationale and capability

The recent, and apparently very timely, decapitation of the al-Qaeda core ought to constitute a severe blow to its ability to inspire and direct the affiliates[6]. Even if some try to play down the importance of Osama bin Laden, and hence the implications of his death, the enormous build-up of his persona over the past decade cannot be dismissed, and the loss of such a symbolically powerful leader must reasonably have significant effects not only on his distant followers but also on his closest ring of lieutenants and sub-lieutenants. If nothing else, the mere suspicion that the raid on his compound in Abbottabad has revealed highly valuable intelligence about how the core operates and communicates with the network must have compromised its operations. If it was difficult to direct the network under heavy U.S. military pressure over the last few years, it cannot have become easier now.

Also, the Arab spring has altered the role of many of the affiliates throughout the region. Generally, they have occupied no more than a marginal position. The demands of the protesters, demonstrators and rebels focus on mainly secular issues such as justice and equality, and the means used have been largely peaceful. In this setting the radical Islamist narrative will fail to resonate. So will the predilection for violent means.

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[5] At a NDC lecture on June 7, 2011, Dr Mohammad Mahoud Ould spoke about a third type of al-Qaeda activity currently developing in Africa's Sahel region and the Horn of Africa, which is more like organized crime but has possible connections with the insurrection in Libya. Although this hybrid form of violence and criminality may have far-reaching effects on political stability in many parts of the world, and hence prove a strategic security issue for NATO, it is not discussed here.

[6] There is of course speculation about retaliatory attacks, but this question falls outside the scope of the present paper.

The question is how the affiliates reason in this scenario. One strategy would be to distance themselves from the core so as to focus on their local and national interests, a strategy which would reduce the risk of global attacks. But on the other hand, if their prospects for local success are restrained by their marginalization on their home front, an alternative strategy would be to go global. However, it is difficult to see what they would have to gain by such a move.
In sum, the difficulties experienced by the core and some of its affiliates suggest that the risk of global attacks has not increased.
The unknown quantity here is the possible role of the cells. Given their elusive nature, it is difficult to predict their role in this context. However, in view of the increased focus on homeland defense in the United States and other Western countries, we might assume that their freedom of movement is highly restricted. It can also be questioned whether recent events in the MENA region would actually give them a reason to attack Western targets, and in what way the effects of such attacks would further their cause.

General conditions

During the Arab Spring, the increased U.S. and Western presence and activity in Northern Africa might be thought to have fueled anti-American and anti-Western sentiments, thereby raising susceptibility to al-Qaeda propaganda. However, this does not seem to have been the case. Analysts of the revolutions claim that the generally secular, albeit Muslim, movements concerned do not blame Israel or the West for their problems and grievances. It is also thought likely that the activists will accept Western support, on condition the West does not try to manipulate the outcome. This would explain why the anti-Western demonstrations which might have seemed likely have not occurred. Al-Qaeda thus has little chance of stirring up enough anti-Western sentiment to legitimize terrorist attacks in Western capitals. And even if they could, the results of ten years of extensive development of Western security systems would prove a formidable challenge to anyone wishing to launch terrorist campaigns at the international level.

Insurrection and armed resistance to ground force intervention

A perhaps more urgent concern for Western states and NATO is the armed resistance that they may encounter if substantial ground forces are deployed where unrest spills over into violence. Since 9/11, attacks from al-Qaeda affiliates in theater have caused far more casualties for NATO members than global terror attacks have. At this point in time, Libya is the only case where such a risk might seem applicable, even though such a scenario would require a UN mandate since Security Council Resolution 1973 explicitly excludes “a foreign occupying force of any form”. Nevertheless, the scenario is discussed and therefore the risks should be weighed.
From al-Qaeda’s viewpoint, the presence of foreign troops provides an opportunity both to engage the “far enemy” on home ground, and also to rally and recruit fighters. Many come from organizations such as the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, LIFG, who were long targeted by Qaddafi’s fierce counter-terrorism and, after 2003, left Libya to join the fight in Iraq.
In these environments, traditional, albeit asymmetric, insurrection is a deadlier threat than terrorism, and hence constitutes a highly relevant security issue. With regard to the Arab revolutions and the Libyan case, if Western troops were to be deployed there would be a theoretical risk of al-Qaeda exporting the concept from Iraq to open up a third front. However, the secular character of the uprisings in Libya and elsewhere, the apparent will of the Libyan resistance to return to peaceful political expression once the revolution is successfully concluded, and the absence of widespread anti-Western sentiment – despite NATO’s continuing involvement – are all factors which speak against al-Qaeda being able to open up a new front in Libya.

Conclusions and implications for NATO

A general fear of rising terrorism as a result of political turmoil in the MENA region is understandable from a rather distant and detached Western perspective, but not very likely on the basis of the above analysis. In this respect, objective views are blurred by the unfortunate tendency to associate the al-Qaeda-affiliated

terrorist and rebel groups, playing second fiddle in the Arab revolutions, with the organization that staged the attacks in the U.S. in 2001.

Theoretically, the “real al-Qaeda” could capitalize on Western interference in the Arab revolutions and stir up a global terror campaign, but the driving forces behind the revolutions do not fit in readily with al-Qaeda’s rhetorical repertoire. To ensure that this scenario does not change for the worse, NATO and its member states should stick to their policy of supporting but not meddling.