

The Battle for Reform with Al-Qaeda

In the summer of 2005, Ayman al-Zawahiri, then-Osama bin Laden's Egyptian deputy, began a direct debate with the United States about the nature of reform in the Middle East. With an assault rifle in the background, al-Qaeda's number two argued that reform must be based on Shari'a and was impossible so long as "our countries are occupied by the Crusader forces" and "our governments are controlled by the American embassies." The only alternative was "fighting for the sake of God." Zawahiri concluded that "demonstrations and speaking out in the streets" would not be sufficient.¹

That salvo in the rhetorical battle for reform set the stage for a fundamental ideological confrontation unleashed by the Arab Spring. If the wave of popular protests sweeping through the Arab world results in genuine and lasting democratic reform, the youth on the streets of Tunis, Cairo, and Benghazi will have proven Zawahiri wrong. A growing number of analysts have noted that these non-violent, secular revolutions focused on local grievances and individual rights will fatally undermine al-Qaeda's ideology and bring about its inevitable collapse.² Indeed, the pristine spirit of the Arab Spring is a direct challenge to al-Qaeda's central narrative. If, however, the Arab Spring leads to division, discontent, and conflict, Zawahiri's arguments will resonate and the rising tide of disillusionment could reenergize al-Qaeda's concept of reform-by-jihad in the Arab heartland.³

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The pristine spirit of the Arab Spring is a direct challenge to al-Qaeda's central narrative.

Paradoxically, the Arab Spring represents a strategic pivot for al-Qaeda and its associated movements (AQAM)—at once the moment is an existential threat to its ideology and a potential window to restore lost relevance amidst its core Sunni constituency. Given these stakes, AQAM's leaders will do everything possible to ensure the survival of their ideology, shape the narrative, and feed off the likely disillusionment arising from this chaotic period.

The statements of prominent AQAM chiefs like Zawahiri and Anwar al-Awlaki—the Yemeni–American cleric and propagandist for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula—and of surrogate groups like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) reflect this realization and their attempts to shape the narrative of the Arab Spring.

The stakes have become even greater for AQAM after the killing of Osama bin Laden at the hands of U.S. forces in May 2011. The death of al-Qaeda's founder as well as symbolic and strategic head could spur leadership divisions and fractures in the global movement at a time when AQAM is struggling for relevance in the Arab world.⁴

For the United States, this is a strategic moment as well—where its national security interests, fundamental values, and counterterrorism goals are joined. Unlike AQAM, the U.S. government can shape the environment that follows the Arab Spring, helping to accelerate and amplify reform in support of the organic movements calling for transparent governance, individual rights, and democracy. In so doing, the United States would not only assist the new democrats of the Middle East, but also deliver a potentially fatal blow to AQAM's ideological appeal in the Arab world. The battle for reform in the Arab world has thus become a potential watershed in the long war against AQAM. The strategic moment is amplified with the loss of al-Qaeda's founder. The United States must recognize this strategic opening, and do all that it can to seize it.

On May 19, 2011, President Obama delivered remarks at the U.S. State Department intended to lay out a broad vision for U.S. policy toward the region in the wake of the popular protests. The President articulated core principles in favor of democracy and liberal values to guide U.S. policy and announced economic programs to help Egyptians and Tunisians in their quests for reform. Unfortunately the speech was overwhelmed by President Obama's injection of Israeli–Palestinian issues and the vagaries of how these policies and principles will be applied across the region.

Even with this speech, there are several reasons why exercising such strategic initiative will be difficult for Washington. With the conflict in Libya festering and dramatic events unfolding across several other countries at the speed of Twitter, U.S. policymakers risk being overwhelmed and missing the broader implications and opportunities of the current environment. A country-by-country response shaped by events of the day may be necessary, but it could impede broader strategic thinking. In addition, policymakers may elect to stand back and “do no harm” given concerns that U.S. efforts to promote reform will not be seen as credible, could taint those supported, or will be clumsily executed and thereby seen as efforts to co-opt the revolutions. Finally, the near-term imperatives of tracking down other AQAM leaders and ensuring that AQAM cannot take advantage of emerging conflict and chaos, security vacuums, and distracted regimes are necessarily the priority for the U.S. counterterrorism community. This leaves little surplus bandwidth for the complex and arduous task of devising a regional strategy that takes advantage of this moment to marginalize the movement’s ideology.

This article considers the long-term implications of the Arab Spring through the lens of the war on AQAM and its ideology. This is not to suggest that the movement is a central protagonist in the unfolding manifestations of the Arab Spring, nor is this an argument for U.S. policy to be driven solely through the counterterrorism lens. This is particularly the case after the death of bin Laden, which

has made AQAM appear less relevant in the American consciousness. Instead, this article rightly asks fundamental questions about how the Arab Spring will impact AQAM in the long term, and what this moment in history means to the ideological struggle with AQAM. How has the movement’s leadership already responded to the protests, and what does this indicate about their strategic reaction to the Arab Spring? What impact will the Arab Spring have on U.S. efforts to combat AQAM, and how should U.S. policies evolve? The goal is to help readers understand this strategic inflection point in the ideological battle against AQAM and to recommend steps to take full advantage of this strategic window of opportunity.

If the Arab Spring leads to disillusionment, it could reenergize al-Qaeda.

AQAM on the Eve of Revolution

To understand the future of AQAM in the wake of the Arab Spring, it is important to establish where the movement stood on the eve of the revolutions.

AQAM operatives were under enormous pressure over the past few years, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Security services had broken up cells and networks, and most quarters were asking fundamental questions about the legitimacy, morality, and effectiveness of the movement's tactics and strategy.

Al-Qaeda core, the group formerly led by Osama bin Laden, was ensconced in Pakistan's tribal badlands and had limited operational reach into MENA. Al-Qaeda core's rhetoric reflected this shift. In 2009, for example, only 12 percent of the propaganda messages produced by *as-Sahab*, al-Qaeda core's official media arm, dealt exclusively with issues in the Arab world.⁵ By contrast, more than 45 percent of *as-Sahab*'s releases that year focused on Afghanistan or Pakistan.⁶

Al-Qaeda core's Arab affiliates were only slightly better positioned to drive the jihad in MENA. Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) failed to recover from its rejection by Iraqi Sunni communities during the *al-Anbar Awakening* and the U.S. troop surge in 2007, which left the group with a very narrow constituency.⁷ Despite this setback, the group has managed to persist and sought to "demonstrate its continued relevance" through propaganda and high-profile attacks.⁸

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Qaeda's second official franchise, executed a devastating series of attacks immediately after its formal merger with the core in 2006. More recently, however, the group failed to maintain operational momentum in North Africa or to extend its reach into the West. Its support base in Algeria had dwindled and "AQIM failed to conduct the high-casualty attacks in Algeria that it had in previous years."⁹ Unable to build support and execute attacks in its traditional area of operations, the group extended operations south into the Sahel, distancing itself from Arab North Africa.

Al-Qaeda's third official franchise, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), has become the most relevant AQAM network in MENA. After an unsuccessful jihad in Saudi Arabia, the battered remnants of al-Qaeda's Saudi branch merged in 2009 with Yemeni al-Qaeda members to create an increasingly capable organization under the banner of AQAP. Taking advantage of a weak central government in Sanaa, the consolidated organization carved out a foothold by "exploiting the grievances of ordinary Yemenis."¹⁰ Although AQAP does not enjoy a broad base of support in Yemen, it has been able to exert undeniable and growing influence among certain communities. Dangerously for the United States, AQAP used Yemen as a platform to hit the homeland directly—first with the failed 2009 underwear bomber plot and later with the failed package plot in 2010. The group's rhetoric and media operations, which affected Western audiences and drew recruits to AQAM's cause, were also problematic for Washington.

Other MENA-based groups in the AQAM orbit such as the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) remained largely defunct. Confronted by local security forces and faced with eroding legitimacy, many of these organizations renounced violent jihad and distanced themselves from AQAM. Members of these groups who remained committed to violence had, in many cases, matriculated to more active groups.

As a movement, AQAM was metastasizing in the run-up to the Arab Spring. This expansion was occurring on the geographic periphery of the Muslim-majority world in places like Pakistan and North America. Within MENA, however, the movement faced growing irrelevance and rejection—a process initiated by its violent overreach in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, and elsewhere. The scores of Muslim civilians killed at the hands of al-Qaeda operatives in the region served to diminish AQAM's popularity. For bin Laden and Zawahiri, who started al-Qaeda in the hopes of bringing about regime changes in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, respectively, this lack of appeal in MENA represented a potential strategic failure. As Zawahiri noted in his manifesto, *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, “we must not blame the nation for not responding or not living up to the task [of waging jihad]. Instead, we must blame ourselves for failing to deliver the message, show compassion, and sacrifice.”¹¹

The Arab Spring represents a strategic pivot for al-Qaeda.

What the Arab Spring Means for AQAM

The Arab Spring has redrawn the geopolitical ground of MENA. Although most analyses have rightfully focused on the implications for the countries affected and the United States, AQAM also is affected by the turmoil. And the verdict is decidedly mixed. On one hand, the Arab Spring represents a contradiction of the fundamental ideological innovations that made al-Qaeda core and the broader movement it inspired distinct from other Islamist groups. On the other hand, the revolutions may fail to give voice to the peaceful aspirations of the protesters over the long term, giving AQAM a potential opportunity to resurrect its flagging relevance in the Arab heartland.

The first ideological innovation threatened by the Arab Spring is al-Qaeda core's focus on the United States and its Western allies, commonly referred to as the “far enemy.” Prior to al-Qaeda core, violent Islamist discourse focused on the “near enemy”: the rulers of Muslim-majority regimes who were accused of apostasy. Despite tactical victories—such as the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981—violent Islamists were unable to achieve

their strategic goal of toppling apostates and implementing Shari'a. This failure prompted bin Laden and his followers to direct their enmity toward the United States and the West, which they saw as the hidden hand propping up the apostate regimes throughout the Muslim-majority world. As bin Laden put it in his 1996 fatwa, "the situation cannot be rectified . . . unless the root of the problem is tackled. Hence, it is essential to hit the main enemy [the United States] . . ."¹²

That the Arab Spring toppled President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia undermines al-Qaeda's claim that the only viable solution to reform was violently forcing the far enemy to withdraw its support for apostate leaders, thereby making these local regimes vulnerable to attack. Adding insult to injury is the fact that the protesters accomplished in days what AQAM and its predecessors failed to achieve in decades.

Even the very nature of the protests discredited AQAM's call for jihad against the far enemy. Whereas bin Laden and his followers killed and maimed, those who

took to the streets protested nonviolently. AQAM's explanation for the problems facing Muslims centered on the hidden power of Western puppeteers, but the protesters focused on local grievances like the lack of jobs, corruption, and ineffective governance. The protesters' motivations were largely secular and modern, while AQAM marched under the banner of religion. Where bin Laden and Zawahiri have called

The Arab Spring was a withering indictment of bin Laden's far enemy strategy.

for a pan-Islamic state based on Shari'a, the Arab streets have been calling for true democracy and a voice in shaping the future of their respective nations. The Arab Spring was therefore a withering indictment of bin Laden's far enemy strategy.

Al-Qaeda core's global conception of "defensive jihad" is the second ideological innovation threatened by the Arab Spring. Bin Laden articulated this idea in his second fatwa against the United States in 1998, stating that killing "Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it."¹³ This disturbing statement built upon the various lines of thinking from jihadi ideologues. One such thinker was Muhammad Abdal-Salam Faraj, an Egyptian revolutionary who was executed as a co-conspirator in Sadat's assassination. Faraj posited that jihad against apostate leaders was an individual duty for all Muslims. Another influential figure was Abdullah Azzam, a mentor of bin Laden's, whose calls that Muslims must actively defend Muslim lands from non-Muslim aggression were met internationally with

volunteers and donations. This obligation has been built on the underlying narrative that the West is at war with Islam, occupying Muslim lands and taking their resources, and that Western policies are geared toward the degradation and humiliation of Muslims. The global defensive jihad is a reaction to this worldview. If bin Laden's first innovation focused the jihad on the far enemy, his second made it an individual duty for all able Muslims to commit to that fight, regardless of where they reside.

Bin Laden's global formulation of defensive jihad relies on persistent oppression. At the moment protesters took to the streets in control of events and their own lives—freeing Tunisian and Egyptian Muslims from the shackles of dictatorship—the underlying theme of a perpetually victimized Muslim populace evaporated, and defensive jihad on their behalf became pointless. With the United States seemingly playing little role in the unfolding events in the Middle East and allowing its long-time allies in Tunis and Cairo to be ushered out of power, the narrative of the oppressive West rang hollow. Although AQAM's call for defensive jihad may still resonate in the context of pan-Islamist causes related to the perceived occupation of Muslim lands such as Afghanistan and Chechnya, the Arab Spring has made bin Laden's plea virtually irrelevant in places where reform is eroding repression.

With bin Laden's death, there is also a challenge to the cohesion of these ideological underpinnings within the global movement he helped spawn. Though AQAM has been injected with this global jihadi DNA, AQAM will likely have more difficulty maintaining ideological and strategic coherence without bin Laden in place to coalesce the movement.

Not only has bin Laden's demise and the Arab Spring weakened AQAM's ideological underpinnings, this moment has also ushered in hope that the social and political malaise affecting Arab populations can be redressed. These are conditions AQAM has traditionally exploited. It is no coincidence that the nations touched by revolution were characterized by a profound lack of freedom. According to Freedom House, 88 percent of people in the Middle East and North Africa were “not free” in 2010, the highest percentage globally.¹⁴

Unable to determine their political fate, most Arabs were ruled by longstanding autocrats who had little tolerance for dissent. When these leaders did undertake reforms or participate in elections, as Mubarak did on four separate occasions, the intention was to create the illusion of progress in order to mollify Western audiences and restive constituents. Today, many Arabs are, for the first time in their lives, witnessing freedom and the ability to shape their political destinies. Such jubilation is a far cry from the hopelessness and humiliation that served as AQAM's midwife.

The sense of elation and self-empowerment borne from the Arab Spring cannot be understated. Contrary to what terrorists like Zawahiri may claim,

AQAM played no role: All the credit belongs to the Arabs who took to the streets. Accordingly, AQAM seems even less relevant in MENA than before the protests occurred. After all, what good are a bunch of militants scattered throughout the badlands of Pakistan and Somalia when non-violent Arabs can overturn their governments? Further marginalized in the eyes of their Arab constituents, AQAM's future as the self-appointed vanguard of the global jihad seems fragile and under existential threat.

This assessment rests on a comforting but perhaps misleading assumption, however. What if the aspirations of the protesters are not met and the revolutions do not bring about long-term reform? What if the bitter harvest of the Arab Spring is disillusionment and discontent? In Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain, this could mean raised expectations deflated by the protestors' inability to overturn the status quo. In Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, where the Arab Spring has displaced the status quo, failure could manifest differently. No longer unified in opposition to the old system, significant disagreements among the protesters could stifle the fragile democratic process. Longstanding traditions of corruption and patronage politics or the rise of a new dictator—secular or theocratic—could have a similar effect in these countries.

Zawahiri and other AQAM leaders are betting hard that the Arab Spring will implode.

Zawahiri and other AQAM leaders are betting hard that the Arab Spring will implode. As AQIM warned in its message to the people of Tunisia, "... it is the right of the Ummah to celebrate this partial victory. It is also its duty to not miss what is intended against it, and to remain cautious and awake, because all the gains it has achieved in this popular revolution ... are now and in the future exposed to thievery, robbery and manipulation."¹⁵

The failure of the Arab Spring could produce a profound sense of disappointment among an entire generation of Arabs. Amid this despair, AQAM's message that armed struggle against the West is the only viable path to reform could find fertile ground. Such a development would be a strategic opportunity for AQAM to reassert itself and regain its relevance in MENA.

Even if this scenario does not come to pass and the reforms catalyzed by the protests enjoy broad-based support, it is a virtual certainty that some constituencies will be left unsatisfied. These aggrieved groups or individuals could become vulnerable to AQAM's ideology, and a small subset might even provide passive or active support to the movement. AQAM does not need to take over the entirety of the protest movement or occupy a capital to regain momentum. Though few in number, disillusioned and radicalized individuals

could help restore AQAM's relevance within MENA. As the movement's history has shown, a small but dedicated nucleus of adherents can survive robust pressure and have geopolitical impact.

How Might AQAM Respond?

Although AQAM is not the central protagonist in the Arab Spring, it will nonetheless try to manipulate the situation to serve its ends. Its statements after the protests erupted—in particular those from Zawahiri—are a clear indication of the movement's intent to shape the narrative of the Arab Spring as disillusionment likely emerges within Arab populations. The movement's strategic priorities with regard to the Arab Spring are threefold. First, AQAM will see this as an opportunity to take advantage of the security vacuum and chaos resulting from the tumult in Arab countries. Second, it will seek to prevent its principal ideological innovations from fading into irrelevance. Third, it will lay the necessary groundwork to exploit fully the wave of discontent that could arise if the Arab Spring fails to bring about lasting and sufficient reform.

In the first instance, AQAM leaders lauded the overthrow of longstanding autocrats like Mubarak and Ben Ali and called for the attack and overthrow of others like Muammar Qaddafi in Libya. They also have viewed the toppling of authoritarian regimes as an opportunity for greater operational activity. In his essay, "Tsunami of Change," Anwar al-Awlaki noted that "our mujahidin brothers . . . will get a chance to breathe again after three decades of suffocation" and "the great doors of opportunity would open up for the mujahidin all over the world."¹⁶

More importantly, in its statements AQAM has set forth arguments intended to explain the continued relevance of its two ideological innovations. In fact, Zawahiri has used the revolutions to *reemphasize* the importance of AQAM's campaign against the far enemy. In his third statement to the Egyptian people, Zawahiri argued that the West discarded Ben Ali when his usefulness expired and inserted a new regime that would give the impression of freedom, but in reality continued to serve Western interests.¹⁷ By spinning this conspiratorial tale of the revolution, Zawahiri downplayed the amazing impact of the Tunisian protestors and identified the West as the ultimate arbiter of events in the country. To truly own their destiny, this argument follows, Tunisians—and Muslims more broadly—must remove Western influence.

Zawahiri also keeps the focus on the far enemy by arguing that AQAM's campaign against the West made the revolutions possible in the first place. In his fourth statement to the Egyptians, he claimed that "America's decline and change in its policies to support the titan tyrants, and her attempt to treat the Muslim peoples with policies of flexibility, trickery and soft power, did not

happen but as a direct result of the blessed battles in New York and Washington and Pennsylvania . . .”¹⁸

Not only did Zawahiri defend AQAM’s far enemy focus to date, but he also promoted its continuation. For Zawahiri, the departure of Mubarak was not enough. Accordingly, he promised that AQAM will “continue attacking America and its partners and aggravate them, until they leave . . . Muslim homelands and stop supporting the titan tyrants in them . . .”¹⁹ For those who hoped that the Arab Spring might reorient AQAM’s leadership away from the West, think again.

Several statements implicitly addressed the erosion of AQAM’s second innovation: the universal conception of defensive jihad. AQAM’s argument was a simple one: although the removal of Mubarak and Ben Ali were victories, the paramount goal of implementing Shari’a remains unachieved and therefore violent struggle remains obligatory. A communiqué issued by AQIM made this point to the people of Tunisia, stating, “The tyrant has left and the system of tyranny and Kufr (disbelief) remains; you have won a battle but you haven’t won the war yet. And here are the Jews, the Crusaders and the apostates plotting against you. Continue your battle to overthrow the tyrannical system . . .”²⁰

Zawahiri echoed this notion in his fourth statement to Egyptians: “the honorable, free ones who are protective over their religion . . . must not be satisfied with removing the tyrant . . . but also they have to continue Jihad and resistance until the Islamic regime rises, which would achieve justice, freedom, and independence.”²¹ As far as AQAM is concerned, regardless of whether or not political activism bears fruit, jihad will continue to be an individual obligation for all Muslims until the entire Muslim-majority world resembles the now defunct Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

In his only statement to have emerged on the Arab Spring, bin Laden cautioned against losing the “historic opportunity to raise the Ummah and be liberated from enslavement to the wishes of the rulers and the man-made laws for Western domination.”²² Interestingly, though, he made no attempt to defend his two ideological innovations, putting him oddly out of synch with other AQAM spokesmen. He made no exhortations for violent resistance nor did he focus on the far enemy.

Regardless of this particular message, AQAM’s leaders have clearly made it a priority to defend their ideology from the Arab Spring. Having done so, AQAM will also try to leverage whatever discontent may arise as the political process plays out. This opportunistic strategy is not new. In the run-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, bin Laden and other AQAM figures effectively positioned the movement to leverage the significant wave of anger that resulted from the invasion of a second Muslim country by U.S. forces. Initially this strategy was successful, and AQI was able to use outrage to attract a consistent flow of foreign fighters from outside of Iraq.

Certainly, if disillusionment makes the environment more receptive to AQAM's ideology, the movement will find recruits, funding, and logistical support to operate and grow. Greater leeway to operate would not only mean the likelihood of more terrorism and sectarian violence, but also greater acceptance and embedding of the underlying principles of AQAM's ideology, which run counter to the precepts of democracy and individual rights and liberties.

AQAM strategists will take advantage of the environment that will emerge—whether it is leveraging greater operational breathing space or feeding off the disillusionment of the protesters—to rebuild support for its ideology. Their statements and resulting narrative will attempt to shape expectations and the perceptions of the people of the Arab world, especially those who may not be convinced that the Arab Spring can bring real change. They will also use any steps—missteps or otherwise—taken by the United States to their advantage. The challenge for AQAM to remain relevant takes on greater significance with the death of bin Laden, with its leadership and survival as an organization at risk.

How Might AQAM Change?

Importantly though, AQAM and its ideology will not remain immune from the effects of the ever-changing landscape of this new Middle East. The shifting environment and the circumstances in each country will affect the movement's trajectory. These changes—directed or organic—may be accelerated because of the leadership crisis and internal divisions arising in the wake of bin Laden's death. There are interesting possibilities in anticipating AQAM's adaptations.

First, AQAM may need to address more directly the opening of political space in Arab countries, particularly the expanding role of Islamist groups in politics. We have seen this debate play out in al-Qaeda core's consistent criticism of Hamas for engaging in political activities to the detriment of jihad on behalf of the Palestinian people. This conflict manifests itself in statements lobbed between the groups, but it has played out on the ground in Gaza, where al-Qaeda-inspired Salafi jihadi groups have challenged Hamas and created headaches for the Hamas leadership.²³ Thus, a more open political environment will present AQAM with the challenge of maintaining its importance when Islamist movements are carrying the banner of Shari'a and Islam through civic and political engagement.

In the current, fluid environment, it would be unwise to dismiss the possibility that segments of AQAM may alter their modus operandi—accelerating strategic debates already present within the movement on the eve of the Arab Spring. Faced with mounting internal pressures before the protests even began, AQAM's leaders have already hinted at some potentially new approaches.

One possibility is an attempt by AQAM to reduce the number of attacks against Muslim civilians, thereby buttressing its popularity and avoiding the mistakes that contributed to its defeat in Iraq and its subsequent loss of legitimacy in MENA. An al-Qaeda core figure named Shaykh Atiyallah called for such an adjustment in a March 2011 statement, urging commanders to issue orders “forbidding bombings and . . . massacres at Muslim mosques and their surroundings, and public places such as markets, stadiums . . . regardless of what the goal may be.”²⁴ Such a shift in tactics would parallel statements made by other jihadi leaders that attacks on Muslim civilians are often regrettable mistakes. Zawahiri set forth this theme of tempering violence and restricting battles in his 2005 letter of admonition to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq, warning him to learn from the mistakes of the Taliban to avoid alienating the local population.²⁵

A focus on development as a tool for the movement could be another potential shift for AQAM. A wide variety of terrorist organizations—including entities within AQAM’s orbit such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)—have successfully leveraged social welfare programs to boost their support base and fundraising. Groups like Hamas and Hezbollah have demonstrated that terrorist organizations can profit handsomely and build loyalty from established charitable operations.

These lessons are not lost on al-Qaeda’s core. In the wake of the 2010 floods that decimated Pakistan, bin Laden issued a statement focusing heavily on the need to ensure relief for the Pakistani people and called for the provision of aid and the creation of a “capable relief task force that has the knowledge and experience needed.”²⁶ In his final speech, bin Laden also advocated the establishment of a “council that provides opinions and advice to the Muslim people” in order to help protect revolutions that have taken place, advance those in progress, and launch new ones.²⁷ Although many dismiss these statements as poorly conceived attempts to repair his damaged reputation, bin Laden’s focused comments on the need for organized aid and assistance efforts suggest that he understood the benefits that accrue from helping people meet their material needs. Following the Pakistan earthquakes in 2005, Zawahiri also made pleas for relief to those affected, criticizing the United States for its purported assault on Islamic charities.

Although there is a major gap between these statements and a wholesale strategic shift, the mere mention of avoiding Muslim casualties and providing social services suggests that AQAM’s leadership has recognized alternatives to its current approach and opens the possibility that segments of the movement could adapt to use these tools. If implemented, such changes could help the movement repair its tarnished image in MENA, better positioning it to regain relevance should the Arab Spring fail to deliver.

Given the degree of AQAM's decentralization, however, it seems unlikely that AQAM's leadership after bin Laden could reorient the movement even if they made that decision. If AQAM's leadership were to issue top-down directives calling for a significant strategic shift in response to the Arab Spring, it would more than likely lead to further fragmentation of the broader movement and its ideology. In addition, al-Qaeda core continues to see itself as the violent vanguard of the Muslim community and could view the work of charities as important but the province of other Islamist groups.

AQAM has already begun to shape its own narrative in the context of the Arab Spring. The environment will be fluid and no doubt affect AQAM's strategies, but it will surely take advantage of opportunities presented to reassert itself in the heart of its constituency and to prove its ongoing relevance. In this regard, it is banking on discontent and disillusionment to follow the Arab Spring.

Impact of the Arab Spring on U.S. efforts to combat AQAM

Since September 11, 2001, the United States has led a global campaign against AQAM. This offensive has relied not just on enhanced U.S. counterterrorism capabilities but on local allies to pressure and dismantle AQAM operations and networks. Many of the regimes weakened or deposed by the Arab Spring were among Washington's most effective counterterrorism partners. The erosion or wholesale collapse of these governments creates a host of new counterterrorism challenges for the United States, as do other developments caused by the Arab Spring.

In the near term, the Arab Spring has interrupted operational pressure on AQAM. Egypt and Tunisia have both disbanded their reviled state security agencies, disrupting the structures that kept tabs on jihadists (and non-violent political dissidents).²⁸ Both countries also freed scores of political prisoners, among them Islamists and jihadists. In Yemen, reports indicate that President Ali Abdullah Saleh has redeployed forces pursuing AQAP to the capital to preserve his rule, prompting U.S. policymakers to consider unilateral counterterrorism activities in the country.²⁹ Swaths of Libya are entirely outside of government control, providing openings for AQAM and any violent remnants of LIFG.

This does not mean to imply that full-blown safe havens have emerged throughout MENA. The caretaker governments in Egypt and Tunisia and the Yemeni protesters do not appear to welcome AQAM. Nevertheless, the political upheaval has shifted priorities away from AQAM, creating new space for the movement to operate where none existed before. Caught between uncommitted or distracted governments and aware of the negative fallout that would result

from unconstrained, unilateral counterterrorism operations, the United States is limited in what it can do. It can continue to press governments to maintain pressure on known AQAM figures and networks, ensure it maintains relationships with security service personnel who will be important to counterterrorism cooperation, and attempt to coalesce more focused regional coalitions to pressure the movement. This could be a model applied with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to ensure AQAP does not gain breathing space in Yemen.

In addition to weakening counterterrorism pressure, the Arab Spring may be creating a more ideologically permissive environment for AQAM. Prior to the unrest, repressive governments prevented hardline ideologues from openly

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espousing their beliefs. Although this policy constrained freedom of expression and therefore had its disadvantages, it kept AQAM on the ideological fringes. With the opening created by the Arab Spring, public discourse in several countries has shifted, allowing some influential individuals to call publicly for certain actions or outcomes consonant with AQAM's ideology.

In February 2011, for instance, Abdul Majid al-Zindani, a Yemeni cleric who is labeled by the U.S. Treasury as a specially designated global terrorist and "carries considerable political and moral weight," called for the removal of the Saleh regime and its replacement with an Islamic state.³⁰ In Egypt, the triumphal return of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the charismatic voice of the Muslim Brotherhood, may give greater legitimacy to the use of suicide bombings against "oppressors and occupiers," which he advocates and has condoned. Even though Qaradawi and AQAM are not directly linked, the open promotion of suicide attacks, as justified by a recognized religious leader and authorized under Islamic precepts, could open the dialogue for AQAM's defensive jihad principles. In the context of such statements, AQAM's violent jihad may seem more legitimate in the public eye.

Another immediate counterterrorism challenge posed by the Arab Spring is the conflict in Libya. This confrontation plays to AQAM's favor for several reasons. Libya's northeast has a history of radicalization, and the fighting there seems to have mobilized local jihadists.³¹ If the conflict becomes protracted, Libya could begin to attract foreign volunteers—perhaps using the same infrastructure that AQIM used to funnel North Africans to Iraq. The migration of foreign fighters to Libya would create a new network of Arab jihadists with combat experience. Another concern is that individuals linked with AQAM could access and export weapons used by rebel forces. Of particular concern are man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS), which AQAM has

used with varying degrees of success to target aircraft from Kenya to Afghanistan. An unnamed Algerian security official quoted by Reuters claimed that AQIM had already managed to obtain a consignment of SA-7 missiles and smuggle them into northern Mali.³²

If inadequate reform leads to disillusionment, the Arab Spring could boost AQAM's resonance in MENA and ultimately produce a new set of long-term counterterrorism challenges for the United States and its Western partners. Even if the reformers somehow manage to fully eradicate the old guard, overcome cultures of corruption, and implement legitimate and effective governance, they will still need to address demographic pressures, economic challenges, high unemployment, and increasing resource constraints. In short, the challenges facing the Arab world are so myriad and severe that some degree of alienation seems unavoidable.

AQAM will do everything it can to exploit this discontent—even if it takes years to do so. Whether its efforts will ultimately succeed is an open question. If the movement manages to position itself as a viable alternative to an ineffective political process, AQAM will likely enjoy increased popular support, additional recruits, and more donors. All of this could lead to a renewed AQAM threat in the Arab world, only this time the United States may not have effective local partners.

It is unclear right now how the Arab Spring will ultimately impact the underlying AQAM narrative of the West being at war with Islam. There is no question though that if the United States is seen to have abandoned the courageous activists fighting for liberty and democracy, it would reinforce this notion—this time drawing on the disillusionment of democrats and dissidents.

It is also unclear how the events in the Arab world will impact the growing allure of AQAM's Siren Song in the West. The trend of radicalization in the West seems to be driven more by local factors such as sub-communal identities (as seen in the radicalization of some Somali-American youth), assimilation and identity issues in Europe, and reactions to U.S. and European counterterrorism and foreign policies.³³ These issues and perceptions by radicalized Westerners may be unaffected by the street protests and the spirit of the Arab Spring.

That said, if AQAM and its ideology are dealt a severe blow in the heart of the Sunni Arab world, the global movement may not be able to recover, and its appeal will grow weaker over time, even if adherents to the cause continue to cause problems. It is not yet clear what the loss of bin Laden will do to the allure of AQAM and its ideology in the West. It is certainly possible that the death of

The conflict in Libya plays to al-Qaeda's favor for several reasons.

the recognizable leader of the global jihad could diminish the heroic appeal of the movement over time to those who have yet to be radicalized.

A Strategic Moment for U.S. Counterterrorism Policies

Despite these complications, the Arab Spring also represents a significant opportunity for U.S. counterterrorism efforts. This is a strategic moment for the United States because, for the first time, Washington's values, long-term interests, and counterterrorism goals against AQAM neatly align with events in the region. The Arab Spring represents what U.S. policymakers have argued and hoped for in countering AQAM's ideology—organic movements for democracy, individual rights, and liberties in the heart of its Sunni Arab constituency. This strategic window is further helped by the killing of bin Laden, an action that will keep al-Qaeda core's leadership on its heels and will roil an AQAM that relied on bin Laden for symbolic and strategic direction and cohesion.

The critical question then becomes what to do to seize this moment without tainting the organic movements for reform. Aside from maintaining operational pressure on AQAM however possible and preventing successful attacks, the United States and Western allies cannot be passive about the long-term counterterrorism implications of the Arab Spring. The Obama administration needs to recognize this strategic opportunity and realize that the battle for reform in the Arab world could lead to AQAM's demise or pave the path for its return.

Washington cannot be shy about shaping the reform that is already underway.

Washington cannot be shy about shaping the reform that is already underway. Where autocrats have been toppled (as in Tunisia and Egypt), the United States needs to help shape the post-autocratic environment; with non-democratic, allied regimes (as with the region's monarchies), it needs to help accelerate internal, non-violent reform; and with repressive regimes that are antithetical

to U.S. interests (like Syria and Iran), Washington needs to question their legitimacy and push for regime change while assisting protesters.

This is not a call for further military intervention or the imposition of American-style democracy in the Arab world. Instead, the United States should use its significant influence against AQAM by engaging in an all-out effort to support economic and political reform in the Middle East and North Africa. This will require a focused campaign, with the United States setting the framework and then enlisting state and non-state allies to support the spirit of the Arab Spring.³⁴

Some have argued for a new Marshall Plan for the region. The focus of such an effort would be right, but in a resource-constrained environment, this may not be realistic. In lieu of direct nation-building on a massive scale, the United States should consider a society-wide effort that takes advantage of America's strategic suasion and leverages the diffusion of power and influence to support the organic movements in the region. This could be a 21st-century Marshall Plan, with resources and leverage consolidated from state and non-state sources. Aspects of this initiative could include:

- Democracy and election advocates—enabled by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)—could help civil society grow and newly-organized groups establish grassroots political prowess.
- As called for by democracy advocate Natan Sharansky,³⁵ special focus and funding, buttressed by human rights groups, could organize and empower the networks of democracy dissidents throughout the Arab world.
- Women's advocacy groups and trade unions could support the strengthening of counterpart organizations throughout the Middle East.
- Deep-pocket philanthropists and America's diverse and powerful diaspora business communities could drive new investments, entrepreneurship initiatives, and economic opportunities for the youth of the region.
- Technology and Internet companies interested in open communications (and customers) could help expand the reach of communication tools, in part to aid political mobilization, but also government accountability and transparency.
- Along with technical assistance, anti-corruption advocates and organizations like Transparency International could help bring best practices for governmental transparency and electronic banking practices to combat corruption.
- Academic institutions like Harvard University, collections of scientists, and academics could serve as detached incubators and conveners for conflict resolution and novel political solutions where crisis persists in the region.
- Hollywood and Bollywood writers and producers could begin collaboration to lionize the new heroes of the Middle East—the non-violent democracy activists who bravely took to the streets and are working for a new future.

Though the United States needs to be careful not to be the central protagonist or taint the organic movements of the Arab Spring—thereby playing into Zawahiri's narrative of the United States being the grand puppeteer—it cannot sit idly by hoping that all works out for the best. With likely disillusionment on the horizon, the time to shape the reform is now.

President Obama's May speech certainly set forth the outlines for U.S. involvement and values and offered explicit and actionable measures to bolster

the Egyptian and Tunisian economies, among other objectives. This, along with a follow-up commitment from the G8 economies for an initial pledge of at least \$20 billion in assistance to Egypt and Tunisia, are important signals and steps, but they are not sufficient to sustain the type of reform needed. Absent in persistent attention, these measures will not suffice if the United States hopes to be an indispensable partner for Arab reformers and in so doing irrevocably diminish AQAM's prospects in the Arab world. Achieving these objectives will require the fulfillment of our commitments, sustained focus, and, importantly, a society-wide effort to leverage the unique expertise and influence of private citizens, non-governmental organizations, and corporations.

Admittedly, in many quarters, the United States has not been seen as a consistent or credible advocate for democracy in the Arab world. Its longstanding deals and relationships with autocratic regimes and the region's monarchies cast shadows on the ideals of American democracy. This moment, however, provides an opportunity for a strategic adjustment and recalibration of perceptions. The principles of the Arab Spring—rooted in individual liberties and the shedding of fear and oppression—are fundamentally American principles for which the United States and its people are best suited to support and advocate.

Importantly, this approach would help bring clarity to the broader U.S. policy toward the Arab Spring and the region. The approach would be the right policy overall to ensure the aspirations of those who have courageously taken to the streets. It would align with U.S. values and interests. Importantly, too, it would help answer the challenge from AQAM to define what happens next and would further ensure that the movement remains on its heels after the death of bin Laden. If the United States makes a significant effort to help the Arab Spring succeed in the long term, it will accelerate the defeat of AQAM and its ideology. Combined with the killing of bin Laden, this could mark the beginning of the end of the long war.

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