

Unrest in the Middle East: Potential Implications for International Terrorism and Counterterrorism Policy

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Abstract

The Arab Spring of 2011 seemed to come without warning to most Western nations. As unclear and as unpredictable as the movement was, so too is its outcome and the implications it will have on Counter Terrorism Policy. Of particular concern for the U.S. is its relationship with Egypt, a strategic ally in the Middle East peace process, and what it will look like once a new government is in place. Overall the Arab Spring has left numerous Arab Governments open to infiltration and influence by Islamic extremist. This paper will explore two possible outcomes of the Arab Spring and argue that, if managed right by the international community, this movement will indeed hurt the Islamic extremist cause and will benefit Counter Terrorism Policy.

Key Words: Arab Spring, Counter Terrorism, Terrorist Ideology, Muslim Brotherhood, U.S. CT Strategy

Introduction

The civil unrest in the Arab world, which has come to be known as the Arab Spring, brought many new challenges to the forefront of geopolitics. Of great importance and concern to the West is the affect that the destabilization of these Arab governments might have on international security and the threat of international terrorist groups in the Middle East. There is a possibility that terrorist groups could capitalize on the weakened political institutions of these countries as they transition to new rule and a more democratic government. Evidence for these concerns comes from the experience of Islamist victories in Algeria in 1991 and Palestine in 2006. (Carothers, 2011) Yet, on the other side of the argument is the optimistic view that the upheaval will in fact weaken groups such as Al-Qaeda and may serve to limit their influence in the region. Both sides of the argument present many new challenges for counter terrorism policy which must be addressed. In the end we are likely to see that the Arab Spring will do more to limit terrorist groups influence in the Middle East in the short term but may also affect U.S. and other Western interest as well in the long term if it is not approached properly by Western countries.

Officials in the West are right to be wary of the political changes in the Middle East and North Africa. Terrorist strategy and the history of groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood have their roots in trying to over throw the same governments that have now been overthrown. To better understand these concerns we must look at the terrorist ideology and strategy's used by groups in this region. Understanding these two aspects will give us a better understanding of the likelihood of these groups gaining a foot hold in the newly formed

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governments of the Arab world. Additionally we will explore the possibility of any connections terrorist groups may have to the popular uprisings and the affects the Arab Spring will have Counter Terrorism Policy in the region.

This paper will cover the events in North Africa and the Middle East but it will also focus heavily on the Muslim Brotherhood and Egypt specifically. This is done for two reasons. One is that when looking at this part of the world, the events in Egypt could potently have the greatest affect on the region and international affairs. Egypt's ousted president Hosni Mubarak was a critical ally to the United States in the region in supporting the peace process in regards to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Mubarak's support for Israel is something that the Muslim Brotherhood had openly criticized him for. The second reason that the paper will focus in these area is that the Muslim Brotherhood is one of the oldest radical Muslim groups which most other radical groups in the Middle East can trace their lineage back to. The Brotherhood's founders are key figures in the ideology of the modern day radical Islamist. Thus, even though other independent groups and offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood will differ on some of their views, which will be covered later on, the Brotherhood represents a good cross section of radical Islamist to analyze.

Terrorist Ideology

There are many reasons why different Islamist groups take the path of violence in order to achieve their goals. The use of terror as a weapon is usually attributed to the fact that terrorist groups are much smaller, weaker and have fewer resources than the governments they wish to topple. Negotiations or diplomatic solutions have either failed and or had no chance of succeeding from the moment these groups identified their grievances and decided to act. Therefore using terror as a weapon, in their view, is the most effective means to achieving their goals. Weather it is due to their status in society or other perceived injustices, ideology plays a significant role in what drives the radical Islamic terrorist groups in the Middle East. These ideologies are critical to understand when looking at and evaluating the effects of the 2011 Arab Spring. Understanding the ideology will help us better understand the impact the Arab Spring is going to have on the region and Counter Terrorism (CT) policy.

Ideology, the Beginning

The origins of modern radical Islamist can be tied to a number of factors from the social standings of the predominately Muslim countries on the global stage to the decline of the Soviet Union in the early 1990's. Each has helped contribute in some way to the ideological driving force behind radical Islamist. However, one of the biggest contributors to the ideology can be traced back to the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Arab world and the Muslim religion in particular have not had a state in a dominate place of power on the world stage since the fall of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. It was the Muslim Brotherhood that was one of the first groups to emerge in the late 1920's as advocates of a truly Islamic state. Inspired by "the works of the thirteenth-century thinker Ibn

Taymiyya and his eighteenth-century ideological successor Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the group's key ideologue, Sayyid Qutb, held that the Islamic world's decline could be reversed only if a small group of "real" Muslims emulated the ways of the Prophet Muhammad and worked to replace the existing governments in Muslim lands with Islamic ones." (Baran, 2005) These scholars and their beliefs have been the corner stone for the ideology of various terrorist groups in the Middle East since the Muslim Brotherhoods founding.

For many of these religious scholars, particularly Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), they believed that "Islam is not merely a set of beliefs, like Western religions. It is a way of life ordained by God for all mankind." (Sageman, 2004) It is from here that Islamic leaders differed on how exactly to achieve the Islamic state. Some Islamist leaders, such as Muhammad abd al-Salam Faraj, believed that the Salafi jihad is a "Muslim revivalist movement advocating the violent overthrow of local Muslim government, the "near enemy," to establish an Islamist state." (Sageman, 2004) He believed that attacking at Western governments, the "far enemy", was detrimental to the Muslim cause and did not go after the real problem which was the corrupt local Muslim governments. While others, such as Osama Bin Laden, who was infuriated by the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, believed that attacking the far enemy was more a more critical task.

Whether fighting the "near" or "far" enemy, one factor remained constant between the differing views, violence was their answer. Qutb believed that "those who have usurped the authority of god and are oppressing God's creatures are not going to give up their power merely through preaching" (Sageman, 2004) This is merely one of Qutb's beliefs which was a critical factor in giving credibility to the use of violence by radical Islamist. Thus the tactics of using terrorism were seen as legitimate and one of the most effective way for these Islamist groups to achieve their goals. It was not until the last half of the 20th century when these groups were able to really begin to work towards their goals and gain international attention for their cause.

The Late 20th Century

Radical Islamist groups in the Middle East had benefited greatly from the Cold War. It provided an ideal situation for radical Islamist groups to not only gain material support from one of the world's two super powers, it also has a larger more powerful state help that was just as interested in countering the West's influence in the Middle East. Many of the Islamist groups were leftist in their political ideology and there for identified with the Marxist-Leninism of the Soviet Union. In the grand strategy of the Cold War, the Soviets supported many of these Islamist groups in order to counter effort by the United States in the Middle East. Additionally, they had hopes to gain Muslim allegiance in the event of a third World War. However, the war in Afghanistan and the end of the Cold War at the end of the 20th century changed the game greatly for the radical Islamist groups.

The first major event that affected Islamist groups was the Afghan-Russian War in the 1980's. Prior to the war the radical Islamist were certainly okay with taking support for the Soviets as long as the Soviets did not try to instate rule over them, something they perceived the United States doing with its support to autocratic leaders in the region. When the Soviets

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invaded Afghanistan in 1979 it became a rallying cry for Muslims around the world and the radical Muslim groups saw it as their opportunity to fulfill their own prophecies as the vanguards of the Muslim world. Muslims around the world would travel to Afghanistan in order to take up arms against the Soviets, and backed by western money and supplies they defeat a super power. The defeat of the Soviets was a huge IO piece for Islamist groups and helped to legitimize the writings and beliefs of Qutb and others, strengthening radical Islam around the world.

The second event that affected Islamist groups, which followed the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, was the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. The end of the Cold War “ushered in a new geopolitical era in which the traditional superpower clash and related debates between Marxist and Capitalist ideologies had been supplanted by cultural clashes defined in religious and civilization terms” (Robison, Crenshaw, & Jenkins, 2006) This new clash of civilization was defined by Osama Bin Laden and his group Al-Qaeda. They would carry the proverbial torch and lead the charge of the radical Islamist against the West. With a strong support network in place, and a monumental amount of credibility, both at the expense of the Soviets, Al-Qaeda pushed its ideology on millions of Muslim youths with great success.

Ideology has been and still is more important than the strategy itself for many Islamic terrorist groups in the Middle East. The rise of charismatic leaders who gained fame for their exploits during the Soviet war in Afghanistan fueled the fire of radical Islam. In describing the importance of these leaders such as Osama Bin Laden, an article in the Economist stated that, “Bin Laden matters because he swept up a ragbag of local grievances into a brand of intoxicating and violent *jihād* with worldwide pretensions.” (Economist, 2011) If it were not for such leadership it is likely that the radical organization would not be as coherent or as well organized as they were at the dawn of the 21st century. With the right leadership in place though, their strategy would take shape and become important.

The Strategy

For Radical Islamist groups to carry out their Jihad against Western countries and Muslim ones as well, they almost have to do it through acts of terror. In attacking the West it’s presumable that Al-Qaeda reasoned, based on past experience, that the West and the United States in particular would continue to take a stance of non-pursuant action. Based off of the response to the bombing of the Marine Corps barracks in Lebanon, the 1st attack on the World Trade Center, and the killing of U.S. Soldiers in Somalia, it was not unreasonable to assume that the West was not serious about going after those responsible. Cruise missiles were fired and individuals were arrested but there was no clear political desire to attack and dismantle the terror networks responsible. Concurrently attacking the autocratic governments of Muslim countries, terrorism was used in hopes of inciting an overblown reaction from the state that would continue to oppress its population and which would ignite an uprising to overthrow the government.

If Al-Qaeda and its associates were going to take down the United States as they hoped, they knew that they had to strike at its financial centers and undermine not only its citizens belief

in the ability of the government to keep them safe but also undermine their power standing in the international community. Osama Bin Laden laid the ground works for this task “by framing the fight as a clash of civilizations, as he drew the West into a global war on terror. The attacks of September 11th 2001 tipped America and the West into a fight that exacted a terrible price in blood and treasure.” (Economist, 2011) The strategy had worked as America and the West fell were dragged into two long protracted wars in Muslim countries. Much like the Soviets in the 1980’s, Bin laden could now rally more Muslims to his cause and point to the U.S. presence in another Muslim county as proof of U.S. imperialism.

In the same manner in which the radical groups saw as an effective strategy in taking out the “puppet regimes” in Muslims countries, Al-Qaeda could now wage an insurgency against the United States. The hope being that either one, they could bleed the U.S. dry of resources or two, the U.S. public would grow wary of a long war and the U.S. would have to retreat before victory could be achieved. In either case, the end result would be the same, a victory for the radical Islamic groups over another Super Power. Such a victory could allow radical organizations to put more of a focus on the near enemy. Popular support would be in their favor and they would have a much greater chance at changing the political landscape in Muslim countries and installing their brand of Islamic rule.

Yet for all the attempts that these radical Islamic groups have made to undermine the security apparatus or the government’s ability to provide for its citizens (both near and far enemies) through violence, they have failed. The Arab Spring was not initiated by years of violent acts of terrorism. It was a few weeks of non-violent protest that was successful. In Egypt, “the government's deteriorating ability to provide basic services and seeming indifference to widespread unemployment and poverty alienated tens of millions of Egyptians, a feeling that was exacerbated by growing conspicuous consumption among a business elite connected to Mubarak's son Gamal.” (Anderson, 2011) The Muslim Brotherhoods’ years of violence against the state had failed to spark the uprising that they had hoped for. Instead, non-violent protesters that restrained from provoking the Mubarak’s regime from using violence caused the regime to fall under its own weight. However, such success does not erase the doubt of whether or not terrorist groups might have had a hand in the Arab Spring as it seems to have come right from their play book.

Potential Connections to Terrorist Groups

The Arab Spring of 2011 was a monumental event in the Arab world that sent reverberations around the world. Carothers explained the protest the best in that “the wave broke just as suddenly and was almost entirely unpredicted by experts both inside and outside the region.” (Carothers, 2011) The protest and overthrow of established governments in Tunisia and Egypt and the continued civil unrest in many other Arab countries seeking democratic reform have all so far appeared to be grass roots movements. These movements however have also raised concern among many experts that terrorist groups could have a hand in the uprising or benefit greatly from them.

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The Fears

There are two fears that have emerged regarding the Arab Spring. The first is that groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood somehow played a role in sparking the uprisings in places like Egypt. If the Brotherhood indeed mobilized and led the protest it would presumably lead to the group taking control of the government and implementing their strict Quranic views as a system of government. However, this is likely not the case for the Arab Spring in Egypt for a number of reasons. In a February 2011 article written for Foreign Policy Online, Blake Hounshell talked about the potential for the Muslim Brotherhoods roll in the recent protest and points out that;

“It’s worth noting that the group did not officially endorse the initial round of protests. (One Brotherhood leader, Essam el-Erian, even said, “On that day we should all be celebrating together” instead of protesting against the police.) Yes, its youth wing later played an important role in defending the barricades in Tahrir Square, while its networks outside the square were critical in bringing in supplies to sustain the protests. But it’s not clear how loyal they are to an older leadership that failed to squarely confront Mubarak for decades.”

Since the article there still is no solid evidence that the Muslim Brotherhood played any significant role in igniting the Arab Spring, only that it is supporting it. In fact, it was not until June 8th that Ayman al-Zawahiri publicly made mention of the events. Even when addressing the Arab Spring, he simply cast support for the movements and did not indicate any involvement in it. (al-Zawahiri, 2011) It should be no surprise though that the Brotherhood jumped at the opportunity to support the protest once they began. Even though there is no connection between the groups starting the protest and the Brotherhood, the fact that they may stand to benefit from it still is cause for concern.

The second fear arising from the Arab Spring is that Islamists will benefit from the shift to a democracy by winning seats in the newly elected governments. This has led to the argument that there is a fundamental flaw with supporting the Arab democracy as it will give radical groups the opportunity to take power of the newly democratic states. Carothers notes that many of the international “observers watching the events in the Arab world worry that expanding the political choices of Arab citizens will open the floodgates to a cascade of Islamist electoral landslides.” (Carothers, 2011) As mentioned above, these observers point to the 2006 elections of the radical group Hamas, which won a majority of seats in the Palestinian Parliament, as their evidence.

These fears are definitely warranted as the Muslim Brotherhood would present a serious threat to Western interest in the region and would also raise concerns from Israel as well. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt continues to publicly support Iranian-backed militant groups Hamas and Hizballah. Indicating they are still holding on to their radical roots despite some changes in the last decade to their political stance on many contentious subjects. Also alarming

is a sampling of comments by members of the Muslim Brotherhood in a survey conducted by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. (LeBlanc & Vanderlee, 2011)

On the mission and nature of the Muslim Brotherhood:

"Concerning the Group's views and stance on the issues of internal reform or any other developments at stake, we quickly evaluate the situation when we observe a certain phenomenon that does not suit our beliefs. You know, Muslim Brothers are reform-oriented. It is our approach and will not change over time. Our stance on the issues of Copts, women, Zionist enemy and all other issues at stake is clear for all."

-- Mohamed Mahdy Akef, chairman, Muslim Brotherhood, IkhwanWeb, October 17, 2009.

On negotiations and agreements with Israel:

"After President Mubarak steps down and a provisional government is formed, there is a need to dissolve the peace treaty with Israel,"

-- Rashad al-Bayoumi, RiaNovosti, February 3, 2011

Both statements are cause for great concern. The first is because the Muslim Brotherhoods stance on many important issues, as they stated, are clear for all to see. Even though in recent years parts of the Brotherhood has moved more to the center politically, advocating for a more democratic institution, rather than strictly Islamic, they are fundamentally not that far removed from their ideological upbringing. Much like Al-Qaeda, the hard line factions of the Muslim Brotherhood wish to institute a government based on strict interpretation of the Koran. Strategically if these groups were able to succeed in implementing their vision of an Islamic government it could greatly impact the Western world's ability to interact with a Muslim Brotherhood controlled government on issues such as security, let alone economic trade.

The Reality

So far there has been no clear sign that Islamist groups have or are going to have a major impact in the Arab Spring. One of the main reasons for the absence of a strong Islamist presence is that countries like Tunisia and Egypt have historically worked to suppress these groups and counter their influence. Radical Islamist groups were never supporters of the autocratic governments of Tunisia and Egypt and had, for decades, actively tried to subvert their authority. There for when the revolts of 2011 began, the radical groups had either been successfully marginalized or had already chose a different path to achieve their political goals. Thus the autocratic states had succeeded in mitigating radical Islamist influence in the Arab Spring which brought their downfall.

In Tunisia "unlike in Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, and most other secular Arab autocracies, the main challenge to the Tunisian regime did not come from Islamist opposition but from secular intellectuals, lawyers, and trade unionists." (Koplow, 2011) The transition in Tunisia has remained free of any major Islamist influence and is likely to continue that way, unless the situation gets worse. What's important to the success of these new democracies is going to be

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the international communities providing adequate support for the fledgling new governments in order to ensure that radical Islamist groups remain vacant from the government.

Counter Terrorism Policy Implications

In assessing the potential impact that the Arab Spring will have on Counter Terrorism policy it is important to look back in history and compare present day events with historical ones in order to better get a base line of understanding. In the case of the Arab Spring, Carothers points out that “never in the Arab world have any Islamist election gains resulted in a theocracy, and established Islamist parties across the region have proved willing to work within multiparty systems.” (Carothers, 2011) Despite this historical track record, there is no guarantee that any of the radical Islamist groups in the region will not find success in establishing themselves in one of the new governments.

Western states would benefit by attempting to engage in a strategic dialogue with the emerging political parties in these countries. The United States has met some success in the past in dealing with counter terrorism issues under the old regimes in Egypt and Tunisia and others in North Africa and the Middle East. However, now there could be some potential blowback for its previous support to those authoritarian regimes. Even though blowback is possible, it is more likely that “whoever is elected president in Tunisia or Egypt will face mobilized populations with little patience for fresh dictatorial methods as well as secular militaries likely to resist any theocratic impulses.” (Carothers, 2011) The politically left leaning Muslim population will likely still have some resentment towards the West and especially Israel. But, cooperation with the West will still be needed for these fledgling democracies in order to gain a stable footing in the international community. The U.S. and their allies must exploit this need as part of their CT policy. Much like how they supported the old regimes in the region, showing support for these newly minted democracy without putting Soldiers on the ground could have huge benefits.

With the success of the non-violent protesters, the prospects of peace in the region is likely higher now than at any other time in recent history. With that being said, there still needs to be an active pursuit of terrorist groups in the region by the United States and its allies. The dramatic and sudden Killing of Osama Bin Laden on May 1st 2011 by U.S. Special Operators was a huge blow to the Global Jihadist movement. But even with the charismatic Arab leader dead Al-Qaeda will live on. Letting up on them now would only give them a chance to regroup and reorganize. Constant pressure from counter terrorism and intelligence agency as well as diplomatic efforts with the new governments in the Arab world will help to ensure that the radical Islamic movement that had been terrorizing the world for decades will slowly drift into the annals of time.

The Good and the Bad

The third order of effects from regime change in other countries could also have a positive impact on counter terrorism policy. Additional threats of regime change around the

Middle East could also have serious impact on other terrorist groups in the region. Most notable is the latest uprising by the citizens in Syria. A regime change in Syria “would threaten a major arms supply route to Hezbollah; deny the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah-Hamas axis its Arab linchpin; weaken Hezbollah's deterrence capacities vis-à-vis Israel; and deny the Hezbollah leaders and their families a safe haven when they feel threatened by Israel, as was the case in 2006.” (Slim, 2011) Any impact on Hezbollah, which has been continues supporters of terrorism in the region, would greatly increase the security of the region.

Yemen is an area of concern for the Arab spring, which is likely to have a different impact on CT than the one in Syria. Regime change in Yemen could greatly affect U.S. CT efforts in the Arabian Peninsula, due to the large influence of Al-Qaeda in the country. Hull points out that “some reports suggest that security forces in Zinjibar, the capital of Abyan, recently acquiesced in the town's takeover by Islamist militants.” (Hull, 2011) This shows us that Al-Qaeda indeed has a greater influence in this country. With such influence, the over throw of President Ali Abdullah Saleh could lead to the U.S. being denied access to the country and a key ally in fight Al-Qaeda on the Arabian pensile.

While groups like Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula are making gains, groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt are feeling the pressure. While some faction of the Brotherhood have broken from the hard-line stance and endorsed a more democratic approach, the hardliners are being marginalized. For the Muslim Brotherhood, “now that the mass public has been mobilized and energized by calls for freedom and good governance -- not Islam -- the movement is in danger of being pushed to the margins of political life. Egyptians are a religious people, but most evince little desire to be ruled by Quranic diktats.” (Hounshell, 2011) This is a positive sign for Western countries who wish to continue to peruse the hardliner radicals that threaten security. By establishing diplomatic relations with the new governments, cooperation can be reached on continued pursuit of the radical Islamist.

Conclusion

The Arab Spring is a phenomenon that will potentially be talked about for the rest of history. Not only was it a grassroots movement that has reshaped the geopolitical landscape, the implications it has for international security concerns are vast. For one, it has illustrated the futility of the terrorist strategies. Despite the “years of bloody strife, the Western way of life has continued to encroach on Muslims. Jihad has failed to banish non-Muslim troops from Islamic countries. Western forces remain in Iraq and Afghanistan. Kashmir is home to the Indian army, and Chechnya to the Russians. Israel still flourishes. Not one treacherous Arab government has yielded to the caliphate.” (Economist, 2011) One could argue that if these countries, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and others can make the successful transition to a democracy than it would be the first strategic success against the Global Jihad in the War on Terror.

Even if Islamist groups work their way into the newly formed governments it is unlikely they will have a major affect on exporting or continuing to support terrorism. While groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood remain defiant on acknowledging the right for Israel to exist, they are still sensitive to international opinion. Shadi Hamid points out that “Islamist are well aware that

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getting tied up in controversial foreign policy efforts would cause the international community to withdraw support from the new democracies, thus undermining the prospects for a successful transition.” (Hamid, 2011) Without the successful transition these states are likely to fall into a civil war much like in Libya. A result that even the hard-line side of the Islamist groups would like to avoid.

Despite the perceived threat from Islamist, there seems to be no clear sign that they are going to seize power and institute a strict Islamic state in any of the newly democratic counties of the Arab World. The power of the people has been seen and they are unlikely to go back to an authoritarian rule in which their new found freedoms are stifled. Even if Islamist enter into the newly establish political order, they will face a different political landscape than what they saw just a year ago. While anti-American sentiment may be used in campaigns to generate support for candidates, they will likely stray from any hard-line stance against accepting support from or cooperating with American and Western influence, in terms of capital, in the region.

U.S. diplomacy is essential for effective counterterrorism. (Hull, 2011) In the wake of the Arab Spring it will be put to the test and should be the corner stone of the CT efforts in these countries until the new democracies are stable, or until another course of action is requested from the Arab countries. What is important now is stabling the counties and building a functional economy that will support the demands of its people. For coming up short may result in another round of protest that could see the Islamist gain all influence in the region.

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