

But Are We Safer?

It could be said that U.S. national security won the proverbial lottery in the first half of 2011. In the spring, a wave of uprisings throughout the Middle East erupted with the goal of replacing corrupt authoritarian regimes with democratic governments. Then nearly ten years after the September 11th attacks, a Navy Seal team found and killed Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in Pakistan. However, hitting the jackpot can be a mixed blessing. With the achievement can come a false sense of security. What followed the successes of the Arab Spring have been the tenuous dog days of an Arab Summer. Furthermore, “bin Laden's demise is in no way to be equated with the demise of terrorism. There is no time for a V-T Day--a Victory over Terrorism Day celebration.”¹ Despite these recent victories for U.S. national and global security, the question remains – are we safer?

The nationwide celebrations that followed the announcement of Osama bin Laden's death showed how deeply entrenched the terrorist leader and Al Qaeda had become in the American psyche. “The devastating September 11 attacks were an exceptional event, unprecedented in the annals of terrorism, with far-reaching consequences.”² Yet the Al Qaeda of 2011 is a vastly different organization than the Al Qaeda of 2001. Al Qaeda today not only does not have the ability to mount another large-scale attack, it has not “mounted a successful terrorist attack in the West since the July 7, 2005, transportation bombings in London.”³ After September 11th, Al Qaeda also prudently changed its focus from scale to scope, “effectively creating localized off-shoots capable of operating independently, like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the terror groups franchise in North Africa, and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.”⁴

While Osama bin Laden was the head of a decentralized Al Qaeda, he was an inspirational, rather than operational, leader. Bin Laden's death “is an enormous blow to the jihadi network in multiple ways, but it does not kill al-Qaeda.”⁵ In other words, the messenger may be dead, but the message is still alive. How has it stayed alive?

Al Qaeda has endured by working locally, operating independently, and communicating globally. According to June 2011 Congressional testimony given by Brian Michael Jenkins of the Rand Corporation, “Al Qaeda survives by embedding itself in local insurgencies. It has joined such insurgencies in Afghanistan, Iraq, Algeria, Somalia, making itself part of a larger enterprise into which it can inject its ideology.”⁶ However, these insurgencies are independent of Al Qaeda and out of their control. Second, Al Qaeda prefers operating on the smaller scales of individual jihadism and do-it-

¹ Richard N. Haass, “Expert Round-up: What's Next for Al Qaeda,” Council on Foreign Relations, May 2, 2011, <http://www.cfr.org/terrorism/next-al-qaeda/p24862>.

² Brian Michael Jenkins, “Testimony: Al Qaeda After Bin Laden, Implications for American Strategy,” House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, June 22, 2011, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/2011/RAND_CT365.pdf.

³ Peter Bergen, “Where will Zawahiri take al-Qaeda?” *Washington Post*, June 17, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/zawahiri-al-qaedas-new-leader-probably-cant-save-the-struggling-group/2011/06/16/AGZKeMZH_story.html.

⁴ Vivienne Walt, “After Bin Laden: Al-Qaeda Will Persist in Diminished Form,” *Time*, May 2, 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2069001,00.html>.

⁵ Gregg Carlstrom, “What's next after Bin Laden death? Osama bin Laden's death is politically momentous for the U.S., but may not sound death knell for al-Qaeda,” *Al Jazeera*, May 2, 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/2011/05/20115255840441224.html>.

⁶ Jenkins, op.cit.

yourself terrorism. The belief is that individual jihad is easier to execute and harder to stop, while the DIY approach – even failed attacks – keep governments on edge.⁷ Finally, Al Qaeda has embraced communications as one of its most important activities, expanding the number of jihadist websites and publishing a well-produced online magazine.⁸

However effective Al Qaeda has been in keeping its jihadist message alive, the organization is facing an uphill battle to stay relevant. First and foremost, bin Laden's death leaves a leadership vacuum. Ayman al-Zawahiri may have succeeded bin Laden as Al Qaeda's leader, but he has not replaced him. Zawahiri is described as "dour", "a black hole of charisma", and "an ineffective leader who is not well-regarded or well-liked."⁹ To keep Al Qaeda together, Zawahiri would have to mount nothing short of a charm offensive. However, "to cement his position, he would have to give speeches, meet with lieutenants, and build trust within an organization that always depended heavily on personal relationships. Of course, all of these activities, particularly if done on a large scale, would risk exposing Zawahiri to U.S. intelligence."¹⁰ In a movement built on bin Laden's charisma, Zawahiri's persona may not bode well for Al Qaeda's future.

Al Qaeda's appeal is also hurt by its competition. "Al-Qaeda supporters have been largely eclipsed by more mainstream Islamist movements waging a democratic struggle." Even while bin Laden was alive "he represented nothing substantial in the field of politics - unlike the more nationalist rivals frequently denounced by al-Qaeda, such as Hamas and Hizballah which combine violence with politics and welfare work, or like Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood that eschewed violence altogether."¹¹ (Although the Brotherhood's track record has shown otherwise.)

Even without competition, Al Qaeda's brand has been on the decline. "In recent years, al-Qaeda has become the Blockbuster Video of global jihad."¹² Mustafa Alan, Director of Security and Defense at the Gulf Research Center, observed al-Qaeda's increasing difficulties in appealing to a new generation. "They are facing a major problem in recruiting and finance," he says. "People are starting to look at them as criminals."¹³ For example, favorable views of bin Laden and support for suicide bombings dropped by at least half between 2003 and 2010 in Indonesia and Pakistan, the two most populous Muslim nations. There have been two driving forces behind this decline. The first "has been the deaths of Muslim civilians at the hands of jihadist terrorists."¹⁴ Second, "bin Laden had become an embarrassment, having helped solidify a global image of the Arabs as terrorists. The Arab uprisings now sweeping the region are an attempt to forge a new Arab image and identity."¹⁵

It is telling that the biggest changes to the Middle East have had nothing to do with Al Qaeda and the jihadist movement. Yet, as Al Qaeda has learned all too well, the biggest challenge is maintaining

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Bergen, op.cit.

¹⁰ Daniel Byman, "Al Qaeda's Terrible Spring," *Foreign Affairs*, May 24, 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67864/daniel-byman/al-qaedas-terrible-spring>.

¹¹ Tony Karon, "Al Qaeda After Bin-Laden: Can the 'Brand' Survive?" *Time*, May 5, 2011, <http://globalspin.blogs.time.com/2011/05/05/al-qaeda-after-bin-laden-can-the-brand-survive/>.

¹² Bergen, op.cit.

¹³ Walt, op.cit.

¹⁴ Bergen, op.cit.

¹⁵ Robert Danin, "Expert Round-up: What's Next for Al Qaeda," Council on Foreign Relations, May 2, 2011, <http://www.cfr.org/terrorism/next-al-qaeda/p24862>.

momentum after the initial success. Months after ousting their autocrats, Egypt and Tunisia are struggling to implement democratic reforms. Syria and Libya are still embroiled in bitter fighting. And after a violent crackdown on protestors, Bahrain recently ordered expats to spy on fellow countrymen.¹⁶ “As the Arab Spring soars, limps, sputters, and stalls—some societies inching toward a new civil order, some erupting in chaos, others' fates still very much up in the air—the only surprise is that anyone should be surprised by what's happening.”¹⁷

Revolutions are typically followed by a period of uncertainty and instability. However, even Arab-style democracies after that initial period are not guaranteed. While it is encouraging that the democratic surge throughout the Middle East and North Africa evolved from the grass-roots level, it is not capable of institutionalizing change. “Countries need to manage an orderly transition. They need to put forward a serious reform process rather than ad hoc measures designed to pacify the street. It would be a mistake to think that economic means alone or limited reforms can be enough to contain the populace. Economic means are not going to address the issue of governance, the rule of law and wider participation in the decision-making process.”¹⁸ Successful democratic transitions in the Middle East are further challenged by the region’s lack of experience with democracy, such as a functioning judiciary, free press, and institutional accountability. “By these criteria, the prospects for the Arab revolutions would seem to range from fair (Tunisia and Egypt) to poor (pretty much all the other countries), at least in the short to middle term.”¹⁹

There are other factors to consider, such as concerns about the role and influence of more mainstream Islamic groups. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood formed the Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt this past June and is part of the current coalition government. This raises further questions about the how secular and moderate Muslim groups will deal with radical Islamic elements in their countries. And there is still the possibility that “if these revolutions are crushed or produce no political change, al Qaeda will find new recruiting space.”²⁰ If Al Qaeda could reorganize anywhere it would be the failing state of Yemen. Then there is Iran, not sitting quietly on the sidelines. To bolster their ally, Bashar al-Assad, Iran has been supplying Syria with weapons and training to intensify the government’s crackdown on protestors.²¹ While Tehran has abandoned their hopes for Khomeini-ist revolutions, Iran will try to take advantage of the regional instability to exert its influence. Most importantly, by working to crush democratic forces in the region, Iran hopes to crush growing internal opposition, especially with parliamentary elections in the fall. This makes support for a strong Egypt essential in thwarting Iran’s agenda.

Another fear is that the progress revolutionaries fought so hard to achieve will not only fizzle out, but revert to something worse. “Emerging democracies tend to be more violent and aggressive than any

¹⁶ F. Brinley Bruton, “Bahrain to citizens living abroad: Spy on countrymen, no protests permitted Gulf kingdom's alleged campaign of intimidation extends thousands of miles beyond its borders,” *msnbc.com*, July 1, 2011, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/43590958/ns/world_news-mideast_n_africa.

¹⁷ Fred Kapan, “Arab Summer, How unstable will the Middle East’s new democracies be?” *Slate.com*, June 3, 2001, <http://www.slate.com/id/2296046>.

¹⁸ Marwan Muasher, “Arab Spring: Eternal Season of flux,” *Politico*, June 28, 2011, <http://dyn.politico.com/printstory.cfm?uuid=CFE8E150-2C38-4F1E-9970-0318A2C4E800>.

¹⁹ Kaplan, *op.cit.*

²⁰ Jenkins, *op.cit.*

²¹ David Amess, “Arab Spring needs and Iranian Summer to survive,” *UPI.com*, July 6, 2011, http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Analysis/Outside-View/2011/07/06/Outside-View-Arab-Spring-needs-Iranian-Summer-to-survive/UPI-10751309954560/?spt=hs&or=an.

other type of regime—and they are more likely to break out in civil war or revert to autocratic rule.”²² Middle Eastern history doesn’t provide the best track record. “Kings were sent packing in Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Tunisia between the 1950s and 1970s, replaced by rulers promising economic and political reforms. Revolutionaries gained control in Algeria and Syria.”²³

The changes inspired by the Arab Spring will take many seasons to take hold. “Despite all the difficulties, it is wrong to assume that this historic moment will die. Too much has changed, and it’s too late to reverse course.”²⁴ However, the longer it takes democratic transitions to occur, the more likely the progress made in the Middle East will be lost. Just as winning the lottery doesn’t guarantee long-term wealth, recent achievements in the war against terrorism and the democratic movements in the Middle East do not guarantee lasting advances in national or global security.

The White House’s newly announced counterterrorism strategy targets Al Qaeda and its ability to strike the U.S. homeland, but “will continue to use ‘the full range of our foreign policy tools’ to prevent [terrorist-supporting] states from endangering U.S. national security.”²⁵ Included in the new strategy are more targeted drone strikes and special operations raids. “The aggressive U.S. drone campaign against al Qaeda leaders will make it even harder for Zawahiri to consolidate control and lead the organization through the aftermath of the Arab Spring.”²⁶ Since the September 11th attacks, punctuated by bin Laden’s death, “we have greatly reduced al Qaeda’s capacity for large-scale attacks, but the terrorist campaign led by al Qaeda may go on for many years. It is fair to call it a war, without implying that, like America’s past wars, it must have a finite ending. But it is time for a fundamental and thoughtful review of our effort. America’s current troop commitments abroad cannot be sustained, nor can we eliminate every vulnerability at home. We have gone big. We need to go long.”²⁷

The outlook for U.S. national and globally security is cautiously optimistic. Al Qaeda may be down, but it is far from out. And the roots of Arab democracies are still trying to take hold. “Although the United States and its allies should not rest after killing bin Laden, they should take comfort in knowing that, for now, al Qaeda is on the defensive and there is one more reason to be hopeful about the Arab Spring.”²⁸

The question that remains then is will the U.S. government capitalize on these pivotal successes to keep America safe? How can the U.S. prevail against Al Qaeda and other radical terrorist movements and bolster fledgling Arab democracies at the same time? Or will failure be snatched from the jaws of success? The answer is whatever the windfall, never let your good fortune go to waste.

²² Kaplan, op.cit.

²³ Henry Srebrnik, “Who will replace today’s Middle Eastern rulers?” *The Guardian*, February 24, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.pe.ca/Opinion/Letters-to-editor/2011-02-24/article-2275973/Who-will-replace-today%26rsquo%3Bs-Middle-Eastern-rulers%3F/1>.

²⁴ Muasher, op.cit.

²⁵ Karen DeYoung, “Primary U.S. counterterror focus is on homeland,” *Washington Post*, June 29, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/national-security/brennan-counterterrorism-strategy-focused-on-al-qaedas-threat-to-homeland/2011/06/29/AGki1LrH_story.html.

²⁶ Byman, op.cit.

²⁷ Jenkins, op.cit.

²⁸ Byman, op.cit.