



~MIDDLE EAST MEDIA MONITOR~

IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

AL QAEDA'S VIEW OF THE ARAB SPRING

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*Middle East Media Monitor is an FPRI E-Note series, designed to review once a month a current topic from the perspective of the foreign language press in such countries as Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, and Turkey. These articles will focus on providing FPRI's readership with an inside view on how some of the most important countries in the Middle East are covering issues of importance to the American foreign policy community.*

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What began as the Arab Spring, and is now being referred to as the long Arab Summer due to its inconclusive aftermath, has been commonly perceived by the media and academia as an indicator of al Qaeda's downfall. The main reason for al Qaeda's apparent demise was the assumption that the turmoil had depleted the movement's relevance, relegating it to the sidelines. After decades of preaching that the only way to remove the corrupt tyrannies of the Muslim world was by armed and violent jihad, the relatively peaceful overthrow of Zine El Abidine Bin-Ali and Hosni Mubarak through mass demonstrations seemed to prove al Qaeda's teachings were wrong. This setback to the movement's narrative not only challenged al Qaeda's ideology, some even argued that it undermined its very existence. However, within this discourse, little attention was given to al Qaeda's own perception of these Middle East uprisings.

The aim of this essay is to consider the manner in which al Qaeda confronted the ideological challenge presented by the Arab Spring. To that end, the article will review various statements and publications released by al Qaeda and its leaders, and attempt to analyze the shift in the movement's propaganda since the beginning of the uprisings in the Middle East.

AL QAEDA'S STANCE PRIOR TO THE ARAB SPRING

Al Qaeda's perception of its own historic role has been one of catalyzing the reemergence of Islam as a dominant global power. Using armed jihad, al Qaeda believes itself to be divinely designated to ignite the Muslim populations to rid themselves of the tyrannical infidel regimes, which have not only deviated from Islam, but are also responsible for the enduring humiliation of the Muslim nation (*ummah*). Eventually these regimes are to be replaced by a righteous Islamic Caliphate, which will restore dignity and justice to the Muslim nation.

Such ideas were repeatedly discussed by Dr. Ayman al Zawahiri, one of al Qaeda's most prominent thinkers and its current leader. In his 2001 book, *Knights under the Prophet's Banner*, he argued that the Muslim nation should never lay down its arms until the oppressors are ousted and the nation regains its lost glory by reinstating the fallen caliphate.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, in 2005 al Zawahiri also claimed that such achievements would not be possible so long as "our countries are occupied by the Crusader

<sup>1</sup> Ayman al Zawahiri, "Fursan Tahat Rayah al Nabi" (Knights under the Prophet's Banner), source: *Al-Sharq el-Awsat*, December 2001, (in Arabic), [http://ia600308.us.archive.org/3/items/FRSAN\\_1/frsan.pdf](http://ia600308.us.archive.org/3/items/FRSAN_1/frsan.pdf)

forces,” and therefore “demonstrations and speaking out in the streets” would not be sufficient.<sup>2</sup> However, while it was clear that Zawahiri did not anticipate the manner or time in which his adversaries’ would be ousted, the ideological background for the day of their downfall was already well established.

## AL QAEDA’S REACTION TO THE UPRISINGS

In Zawahiri’s first two messages of “Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt,” most likely written before he knew of the dramatic turbulence in the country, al Zawahiri once again expressed his animosity toward the Mubarak regime. He stated that “Egypt’s present state is one of deviation from Islam” with an “oppressive regime that rules over its people with oppressive forces.”<sup>3</sup> Mubarak was portrayed as “big traitor” who continues to “provoke Islamic sentiment.” Unsurprisingly, once informed of the Arab Spring protests and their scope, al Zawahiri and the rest of al Qaeda’s leadership unanimously embraced the revolutions. The uprisings were referred to as a “popular, brave revolution,” and the people of Tunisia and Egypt as “lions, honorable, and free.”<sup>4</sup> While the final results of the upheaval were still far from determined, al Qaeda’s stance was clearly articulated by Anwar al Awlaki, a leading figure in al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). In his article “Tsunami of Change,” which appeared in the May 2011 *Inspire* magazine, Awlaki clarified, “...we do not know yet what the outcome [of the uprisings] would be, and we do not have to. The outcome doesn’t have to be an Islamic government for us to consider what is occurring to be a step in the right direction.”<sup>5</sup> Abu Yahya al Libi, another prominent al Qaeda leader, who was also mentioned as a possible successor to Bin Laden, referred to the current struggle as “one step of many efforts to reach the goal.”<sup>6</sup> In his posthumous message, Osama Bin Laden shared his “happiness and joy, cheerfulness and delight” with the protestors and said that the revolutions were what the “*ummah* had been waiting for long decades.”<sup>7</sup> Bin Laden also expressed his hope that the “the winds of change will spread over the entire Islamic world,” as it was finally time to be liberated from the oppressive “Western domination.”

## RESHAPING THE NARRATIVE

Naturally, al Qaeda was forced to reshape its narrative, adjusting its traditional Islamist propaganda in light of the unexpected new reality. For example, al Awlaki explained that while the assassination of Anwar Sadat (“the most spectacular event of its time”) was the act of vanguard jihadists, Mubarak’s removal was achieved “not by a selected few but by the entire population.”<sup>8</sup> Al Zawahiri was exceptionally skilled at employing such propagandistic twists: he reminded his adherents that before he escaped from Egypt he “participated in many popular protests and demonstrations” and was even “in Tahrir Square in 1971.”<sup>9</sup> In a farfetched claim, he also stated that the tyrannies’ fall was a “direct result of the blessed battles in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania, after which America and the rest of the Western countries began redrawing their policies.”<sup>10</sup>

Such statements, whose truth is somewhat questionable, reflect al Qaeda’s attempt to show its followers that *it* was a driving force behind the Arab Spring, leading, rather than left behind in the uprisings. Even though the events did come as a surprise to the movement, al Qaeda’s leadership did not admit, let alone regret or show embarrassment over the fact that such major changes occurred without their direct assistance.

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<sup>2</sup> Laura Mansfield, “His Own Words: A Translation of the Writings of Dr. Ayman Al Zawahiri,” *TLG Publications*, 2006, p. 247-248, quoted in: Juan C. Zarate and David A. Gordon, “The Battle for Reform with al Qaeda,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2011), p. 110, [www.twq.com/11summer/docs/11summer\\_Zarate\\_Gordon.pdf](http://www.twq.com/11summer/docs/11summer_Zarate_Gordon.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> al Zawahiri, “Message of Hope and Glad Tidings for Our People in Egypt,” February 18, 2011, p. 3 [www.globalterroralert.com/images/documents/pdf/1210/flashpoint\\_zawahiri0211.pdf](http://www.globalterroralert.com/images/documents/pdf/1210/flashpoint_zawahiri0211.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> al Zawahiri, “Message of Hope and Glad Tidings for Our People in Egypt, Episode 6,” May 21, 2011, <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/ayman-ae1ba93-e1ba93awc481hirc4ab-e2809csixth-installment-of-a-message-of-hope-and-glad-tidings-to-our-people-in-egypte2809d-en.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Anwar al Awlaki, “The Tsunami of Change,” *Inspire*, Spring 1431/2011, Issue 5, pp. 50-53. <http://info.publicintelligence.net/InspireMarch2011.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Abu Yahya al Libi, “*Ila ahelna fi al libya*” (To Our People in Libya”), March 13, 2011, p. 8 (in Arabic)

<sup>7</sup> Usama Bin Laden: “Message to His Ummah,” *Flashpoint*, May 18, 2011, pp. 1, 2, [http://flashpoint-intel.com/images/documents/pdf/0110/flashpoint\\_ublfinal0511.pdf](http://flashpoint-intel.com/images/documents/pdf/0110/flashpoint_ublfinal0511.pdf),

<sup>8</sup> “The Tsunami of Change,” pp. 50-53.

<sup>9</sup> al Zawahiri, “Message of Hope and Glad Tidings for Our People in Egypt, Episode 6,” p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> al Zawahiri, “Message of Hope and Glad Tidings for Our People in Egypt, Episode 4,” March 3 2011, p. 2. Translated by Flashpoint Partners.

## THE IMMEDIATE BENEFITS FOR THE MOVEMENT

In the decade after the 9/11 attacks, al Qaeda has been under constant pressure. The security services of Middle Eastern states have succeeded in breaking up its cells and networks, thus leading its adherents to question the legitimacy, morality, and effectiveness of the movement's tactics and strategy.<sup>11</sup> It is not surprising then, that from a jihadist point of view, the collapse of Western-backed regimes had immediate advantages. As al Awlaki articulated: "So leaving the expectations of what might or might not happen in the future, let's take a look at how this already benefited the Ummah."<sup>12</sup>

After decades in which the Islamist groups suffered from frequent and brutal crackdowns by the nearly omnipotent security forces, the jihadists were given unexpected operational freedom to restore their networks. Indeed, a decade ago, al Zawahiri still commented that "finding a secure base for jihad activity"<sup>13</sup> was a major problem. Once the uprising began, al Awlaki was quick to note the immediate benefits of the currently unfolding situation, expressing trust that the "mujahidin brothers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and the rest of the Muslim world will get a chance to breathe again after three decades of suffocation."<sup>14</sup> In addition, throughout the protests and unrest, thousands of "political prisoners" (a term often used in the Middle East to refer to convicted Islamists) were released. This replenished the jihadists' ranks. In addition, the lack of fully exercised state-sovereignty in broad areas seemed to present a more convenient atmosphere to promote their long-term aspirations.<sup>15</sup>

## DANGEROUS, YET HISTORIC OPPORTUNITY

In light of the unfolding events, similar to the remarks made by Western commentators, Bin Laden had observed that the Muslims were "before a dangerous crossroads and a great, rare and historic opportunity."<sup>16</sup> He emphasized that it was necessary 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."<sup>17</sup> In response to what seemed like the beginning of a democratic transition, Zawahiri portended that "the principle of 'the rule of the majority,'" is "without abidance by any religion, morality, value or principle."<sup>18</sup> Yahya al Libi warned the people not to "waste the fruits of liberation," and strive to establish a just, Sharia-based regime, since democracy was nothing less than a "road to hell."<sup>19</sup>

Nonetheless, in al Qaeda's view, the most promising change had already occurred. The overthrowing of Mubarak and Ben Ali and the visible downfall of Moammar Gaddafi and Ali Abdullah Saleh, indicated to al Qaeda that America's "agents began collapsing like dry leaves in the fall in Tunisia and Egypt, and tomorrow in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and the Arabian Peninsula."<sup>20</sup> With such insight, al Zawahiri observed that "America's defeat has begun appearing in the horizon."<sup>21</sup> To al Qaeda's leaders it now appears that the Muslim *ummah* finally has the opportunity to release itself from Western oppression and that there is hope that the tyrants' downfall will bring their vision of an Islamic Caliphate closer to realization.

## CONCLUSION

Not only did the Arab Spring uprisings come as a complete surprise to al Qaeda, they also contradicted its basic assumption that political change could only be achieved violently. Nonetheless, al Qaeda's leadership responded to the events by clearly shifting its propaganda. It chose to highlight the important ways this new reality can lead to a resurgence of the movement. Al Qaeda's statements prior to—and throughout—the uprisings demonstrate that while the Arab Spring essentially challenged its own narrative, it was nonetheless welcomed by al Qaeda as an historical opportunity to achieve its long-term objectives. Al Qaeda's leaders observed the downfall of the tyrannical regimes positively and considered these regimes actively hostile toward Islamists. In addition, al Qaeda's leadership appeared equally encouraged to witness the ostensible weakening of America's influence in the region.

Al Qaeda's statements surrounding the Arab Spring are, of course ambiguous. These public pronouncements blend

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<sup>11</sup> "The Battle for Reform with al Qaeda."

<sup>12</sup> "The Tsunami of Change," pp. 50-53.

<sup>13</sup> al Zawahiri, "Fursan Tahat Rayah al Nabi" (Knights under the Prophet's Banner), source: *Al-Sharq el-Awsat*, p. 64.

<sup>14</sup> al Awlaki, "The Tsunami of Change," *Inspire*, March 29, 2011, p. 52

<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed analysis on these issues, see: Schweitzer and Stern, "A Golden Opportunity? Al-Qaeda and the Uprisings in the Middle East."

<sup>16</sup> Bin Laden, "Message to His Ummah," p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> "To Our People in Tunisia," Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), January 26, 2011, Translated by NEFA Foundation, pp. 1-2. <http://nefafoundation.org/file/AQIM0211.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> al Zawahiri, "Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Episode 4," p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> "*Ya ahelna fi Tunis, la tud'iyu al thamra*" (To our people in Tunisia, do not waste the fruits of liberation), *Sada al Malahim*, journal of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, February 18, 2011, (in Arabic) p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> al Zawahiri, "Message of Hope and Glad Tidings for Our People in Egypt, Episode 6," p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> al Zawahiri, "Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Episode 4," pp. 6, 9.

propaganda, traditional Islamist preaching, and at times, sheer wishful thinking. They do not necessarily reflect the reality in which al Qaeda will continue to operate. Presently, the ongoing military campaign against al Qaeda and its affiliates has significantly limited its operational capacity. However, the new reality in the Arab world, which might unexpectedly offer favorable conditions for al Qaeda and its affiliates' actions, has invigorated, not weakened, the movement's aspiration to establish a global Islamic Caliphate.

\*This essay grew out of "A Golden Opportunity? Al-Qaeda and the Uprisings in the Middle East", co-authored by Yoram Schweitzer and Gilad Stern, which initially appeared in the Strategic Assessment series of the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). While "A Golden Opportunity?" discussed relatively briefly this subject, this paper offers a more comprehensive analysis of Al-Qaeda's perspective vis-à-vis the Arab Spring.

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