

**International Security Monthly Briefing – June 2011**

## **AL-QAIDA AND THE ARAB AWAKENING**

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### **Introduction – Spring or Awakening?**

The 2011 briefings have so far concentrated on the rapid pace of developments across North Africa and the Middle East since January, a process of public action that has variously been named the “Arab Spring” or the “Arab Awakening”. The term “Arab Spring”, from a western cultural perspective, looks back to the “Prague Spring” of 1968 and is often mistakenly conflated with overthrowing of communist regimes across Eastern Europe and their replacement by pro-Western Governments at the end of the Cold War some eleven years later. “Arab Awakening” is more commonly used in the Middle East and does not necessarily relate to the idea that the overthrow of autocratic regimes will result in pro-western states. This is an apparently small but highly significant distinction. It serves as a salutary reminder that what is happening across the region comes from within Arab societies and that many of the regimes under threat have actually been closely allied to the West. From that perspective, there is a world of difference between the end of the Cold War and what is now happening.

### **Developments Across the Region**

The war in Libya has continued through June, with NATO increasing its bombing campaigns and extending the range of targets to include residential compounds occupied by people close to the leadership. Such targeting, coupled with some errors, has increased the number of civilian casualties, and there have also been “friendly fire” incidents leading to casualties amongst the rebel forces. At the time of writing the Gaddafi regime appears quite secure. There could be a sudden collapse at any time but this does not seem likely, as even rebel sources speak of many weeks of conflict ahead. If that is the rebel view, then the reality may be a very much longer conflict and it is worth noting that, in April, Canadian sources within NATO were talking of a war lasting six months or more.

Two features of the war suggest that the NATO alliance has serious problems ahead. One is that in Washington there has been cross-party Congressional opposition to the relatively small American involvement in the war, with this likely to reinforce the Obama administration’s policy of avoiding any increase in its involvement. This leads to the second point – that there are divisions among the European members of NATO over the whole stance of the operation. As a result, the only substantial military forces available are those of France and the UK, with sources in the UK military already expressing doubt over the feasibility of maintaining current levels of air power operations. There is not even a remote chance of the large-scale use of NATO ground troops to terminate the regime and it is this factor that suggests there will be a long drawn-out conflict.

The decision of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to indict Gaddafi and two close associates may be entirely legitimate considering the appalling behaviour of the regime towards its opponents, but it does mean that any settlement would have to be achieved without Gaddafi being allowed to go into exile. It is true that many countries have not ratified the Rome Statute of 1998 that led to the establishment of the ICC in 2002, These include Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Syria (and, interestingly, the United States, Russia, and China). Even the regional non-signatories would be unlikely to give the Colonel safe haven.

As pointed out in the May briefing (*Libya at the Centre*), while Gaddafi is not popular across the region, the longer the war goes on, the greater the risk is that it will be seen as yet another western military intervention in an Arab state. This is even more marked given the studied lack of any prospect of

intervention in Syria, where the Assad regime is determinedly repressing rebellion. Across Syria, the opposition to the regime may be widespread, but there has not yet been a substantial groundswell of public protest in Damascus or Aleppo. If that should change, then the regime would, for the first time, be seriously threatened.

Even so, with the notable exceptions of Tunisia and Egypt, most regional autocracies currently retain their power, with the Saudis assiduous in supporting monarchies in Bahrain and Jordan, as well as being singularly anxious over the fate of the Assad regime in Syria. It is also relevant that while public pressure for reform in Egypt is being maintained, the current military leadership is entrenched. In spite of all of the mass protests earlier this year it is far from certain that power will extend beyond the political and military elites that remain entrenched in their positions. Leaders of the public protests currently express concerns that there are still major challenges in seeking political and socio-economic emancipation.

### **Al-Qaida's Opportunity**

The al-Qaida movement has replaced Osama bin Laden as leader with Ayman al-Zawahiri, formerly bin Laden's deputy and widely regarded as the movement's long-standing ideologue. Zawahiri does not have bin Laden's stature, even if bin Laden was a diminished figure prior to his death on 2 May, and there has been a widespread consensus among US counter-terrorism analysts that the movement is in retreat. This is certainly true if Al-Qaida is defined as a narrowly hierarchical and centrally organised movement. However, the "idea" of the movement retains an attraction in many parts of the Middle East and South Asia, as well as among minorities in diasporas in Europe and North America.

Over the past two decades, the Al-Qaida movement has for been primarily a reactive entity, responding to perceptions of marginalisation, and of Islam being under attack, especially from the "far enemy" of the United States, its Zionist ally and its collaborative regional regimes collectively regarded as the "near enemy".

What is of huge significance to the movement is the fate of the Arab Awakening. If the near-revolutionary changes now in progress in Tunisia and Egypt are successful, and are emulated elsewhere, then the al-Qaida movement faces its greatest challenge. However much the new leadership might extol the public opposition to regional autocracies, the reality is that al-Qaida has been pushed into near-irrelevance as multifaceted and frequently secular public protests have carried the day. If, though, the awakening falters and autocracies retain, or in some circumstances even regain, control, then al-Qaida and related jihadist entities may rapidly return to centre stage. In this context, recent developments in Yemen are particularly significant.

### **Yemen in Focus**

The conflict in Yemen that has evolved with the decline in power of the Saleh regime is complex. This populous country (24 million people) has been held together in the face of clan revolts in the north and secessionist tendencies in the south by a high degree of repression, even though the regime has had support from western states anxious to prevent a failed state. In the face of determined opposition from multiple sources the regime has clung onto power until now, but it is increasingly fractured, not least with President Saleh currently in Saudi Arabia for medical treatment.

In the Saleh regime's desire for power, control of Central Yemen, especially the capital city of Sana'a, has been the priority and this has led to the neglect of security in the south where secessionist pressures have escalated. In the absence of central control, a security vacuum has emerged leading to widespread lack of order and sustained difficulties for many ordinary people in towns and cities such as Aden, Mukalla and the provincial capital of Zinjibar. From this environment has emerged a number of Islamist militias, not fully coordinated and only partially linked to the al-Qaida movement.

Even so, by late May they were reported to be in effective control of Zinjibar and to have attacked a prison in Al-Mukalla, releasing many paramilitary prisoners. Coalescing into a loose affiliation under the title Ansar al-Sharia (Partisans/Followers of Sharia), they retained control of Zinjibar during June in the face of attacks by Yemeni government forces. Moreover, there was concern in Sana'a that they might eventually be able to take control of the strategic southern port city of Aden.

What is especially significant about this development has been the reaction of people living in those districts where the Islamist paramilitaries have gained control. While information is relatively sparse, there are indications that the militias can often be welcomed because of the manner in which they bring a high degree of order into an environment that is notably insecure and highly dangerous.

There are significant echoes here of developments in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s. At that time, warlords and violence were rife and the Taliban were initially welcomed, in spite of their rigid and often brutal imposition of a very narrow interpretation of Islam, because they brought order to chaos and eschewed bribery and other forms of corruption. That did not last once they were in full control of the country given the brutality of the Taliban regime. By 2000, the Taliban were losing popularity, but their initial popularity should not be discounted. This pattern may be repeated in Yemen; for the moment significant parts of the south of the country seem positively to welcome Jihadist paramilitaries.

These developments are causing acute concern in Saudi Arabia and the United States, and President Saleh is under substantial pressure to stand down in order to allow a more representative governance to emerge. He has been in Saudi Arabia for medical treatment after an attack on his Presidential compound on 3 June.

In addition, though, both Washington and Riyadh will want to counter the rise of those movements linked, however loosely, to the al-Qaida vision. For the United States this is already leading to the more widespread use of armed drones, with the CIA enhancing its operations in Yemen. More direct intervention in Yemen, beyond the use of drones, Special Forces and Saudi air power is unlikely in the short term, but the prospects for radical Islamist movements are considerable.

## Conclusion

Last month's briefing concluded by warning that a long-lasting civil war in Libya that involved NATO would progressively alienate regional public opinion. That is still the case, some weeks on, but it may be that current developments in Yemen turn out to be just as significant. There will be strong pressure within the United States to respond to the rise of al-Qaida-linked groups there, but that could be singularly counter-productive. Moreover, the real significance of what is happening in Yemen relates to the wider Arab Awakening. If that were to falter, and especially if any other states were to experience the levels of disorder and lack of security now facing Yemen, then this would present a real opportunity for Islamist groups to regain credibility.

In Yemen it is a matter of these groups responding to rampant insecurity and near-anarchy – bringing a kind of order to chaos. Elsewhere in the region a much more seductive message could be promoted. This is that if mass non-violent protests fail to achieve fundamental reforms, then there can be no alternative to a far more radical approach. Conventional wisdom is that the al-Qaida movement is in retreat. That probably is the case, but if repressive autocracy succeeds across the region, this could change rapidly.

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