I. Articles

Al-Qaeda's Response to the Arab Spring

by Donald Holbrook

Abstract

The Arab revolutions, often referred to collectively as the 'Arab Spring', posed, and continue to present, a considerable challenge for Al-Qaeda. This article assesses how Al-Qaeda's senior leadership, as well as affiliates and associates, have responded to the Arab Spring, by analysing media material and public communiqués issued in the aftermath of the uprisings. The first section discusses the impact of the Arab Spring on Al-Qaeda. The second section explores the Al-Qaeda core leadership response to the revolutions, especially the ways in which Ayman Al-Zawahiri has chosen to frame the events. The third section examines the way Al-Qaeda's affiliates and associates have responded to the revolutions, including contributions to the English-language Inspire *magazine. Overall, The article describes how Al-Qaeda has sought to interpret the events in its favour and how it hopes to exploit the current turmoil in the wake of the Arab revolutions.*

The Arab Spring and Al-Qaeda

On 17 December 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor from Sidi Bouzid, a city in central Tunisia, set himself alight to protest against police brutality and the widespread corruption that prevailed under the presidency of Zine El Abidine. Ben Ali. Bouazizi's self-immolation initially triggered local protests that quickly turned to national upheaval against decades of misrule, abuses of power and corruption. This uprising inspired scores of protesters elsewhere in North Africa and the Middle East to rise up against their authoritarian rulers.

These seminal events are often referred to as the 'Arab Spring'. To date, they have resulted in the overthrow of the Tunisian, Egyptian, Yemeni and Libyan regimes. A bloody civil war has broken out in Syria as the Assad regime struggles to quell a rebel uprising, whilst further protests continue to take place elsewhere in the region. Meanwhile, the post-revolution countries are undergoing a volatile period of transition from the old system.

The Arab Spring appears in many ways to be bad news for Al-Qaeda. The foundational core of the group consists of Arab Islamist extremists, many of whom had dedicated most of their adult lives to fighting against the secular 'tyrants' of the Middle East and North Africa. Yet, as many observers have noted, the events did not unfold as Al-Qaeda had envisaged and appeared to undermine core tenets of the Al-Qaeda doctrine. Five key points seem particularly significant.

Firstly, the regimes fell without Al-Qaeda playing its envisaged leadership role for the *ummah*. The groups of youths that took to the streets in Tunisia and Egypt did not do so in response to any initiative from Al-Qaeda. The anti-Gaddafi rebels, moreover, were not fighting an Al-Qaeda-inspired jihad, and even accepted help from Al-Qaeda's arch rivals in the North Atlantic Alliance. [1] "A core argument of Al-Qaeda", James Forest argued, "has been that corrupt, Western-backed regimes can only be changed through the use of terrorist attacks to mobilize the *ummah*. But in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, change has taken place without any meaningful involvement whatsoever by Al-Qaeda." [2]

Second, the chosen form of activism – including popular mass uprisings that were largely peaceful in Egypt and Tunisia and a NATO-supported armed revolt in Libya – clearly contradicted Al-Qaeda's assertion that violent jihad led by a righteous vanguard was the only appropriate method for change. "That change has finally come to Egypt and Tunisia […]", Alex Wilner noted, "as a result of popular and generally peaceful movements is an embarrassment to Al-Qaeda, whose entire script has been predicated on the idea that violent overthrow is the only way forward." [3]

Third, as Wilner, N. Lahoud and others have noted, the removal of the secular dictatorships left a large gap in the rhetoric of the Al-Qaeda leadership, which has relied on the unpopularity of these regimes to promote alternative forms of governance based on its interpretation of Islamic law. With the Arab Spring, therefore, Al-Qaeda lost a powerful component of its rallying call to disenfranchised Arab publics. [4].

Fourth, some argued Al-Qaeda, particularly its central leadership, had been slow in reacting publicly to such seminal events affecting the core of its potential 'constituents.' Weeks passed from the initial Tunisian uprising, and even after the protests spread further, before the Al-Qaeda leadership addressed those living in the region through statements distributed online [5]. The rapidity with which images, footage and accounts from the unfolding events surrounding the Arab Spring were distributed via social networks and online forums appeared to accentuate Al-Qaeda's slow response.

Fifth, the ideas that appeared to drive many of the activists at the heart of the Arab Spring, and the essence of subsequent political developments following successful revolutions, contradicted the fundamental values of the Al-Qaeda doctrine. This relates in particular to the importance of democratic self-determination and symbols of nationalism that have been the focus of attention in academic and journalistic discourse concerning the events. These are anathema to the Al-Qaeda leadership. [6]

However, despite all these challenges that seem to expose the weakness and marginalisation of Al-Qaeda, the Arab uprisings presented opportunities that some elements of Al-Qaeda may be able to exploit.

Many commentators have observed that great upheaval is inevitably followed by great disappointment and disillusionment. Juan Zarate, for instance, has warned:

> The chaos and disappointment that follow revolutions will inevitably provide many opportunities for Al-Qaeda to spread its influence. Demographic pressures, economic woes and corruption will continue to bedevil even the best-run governments in the region. Divisions will beset the protest movements, and vestiges of the old regimes may re-emerge. [7]

"The greater the level of post-revolution optimism is among Arabs and Muslims," Wilner observes, "the greater the risk of exceptionally high levels of disillusionment, resentment, and anger if and when things go sour on the ground." [8]

The current turmoil may, in some regions, develop into more prolonged ethnic or civil strife and violent clashes between opposing forces seeking to fill the vacuum left by the toppled dictators. This is something Al-Qaeda could exploit rhetorically, as well as more directly, through affiliates. Indeed, the removal of dictators and their apparatuses of control and subjugation, has also ushered in a period of lawlessness in some parts, which makes trafficking arms and moving fighters easier. [9] Recently, for example, the director of the British Security Service warned that as a result of the disorder, parts of the Middle East and North Africa might "once more become a permissive environment for Al-Qaeda." [10]

Of particular concern, at the moment, is the increasingly bloody civil war in Syria, where militant Islamists are playing some role in the fighting. Proportionately, the number of jihadi fighters and Al-Qaeda sympathizers in Syria appears to be very small. Yet, a recent article in the *New York Times* warned that "Syrians involved in the armed struggle say it is becoming more radicalized: home-grown Muslim jihadists, as well as small groups of fighters from Al Qaeda, are taking a more prominent role and demanding a say in running the resistance." Islamist extremist web forums now frequently distribute images showing armed '*mujahideen*' taking part in fighting in Aleppo and elsewhere, displaying the black 'Prophet's banner', which has been used by Al-Qaeda in Iraq. [11] Some, of course, may use the label without being sympathetic towards the jihadi cause. For others, however, "jihad has become a distinctive rallying cry." [12] A particularly prominent jihadi group to emerge out of the current turmoil in Syria is *Jabhat An-Nusra*, which has been active in key areas of the conflict and particularly prolific in disseminating communiqués. These messages, in turn, have been translated into several languages, including Russian and English, in what could be seen as an attempt to recruit 'foreign fighters' from abroad. [13].

Aside from the on-going war in Syria, moreover, Islamist militants are increasingly prominent in other domestic conflicts, especially in northern Mali. Series of attacks have taken place in the Sinai on the Egyptian-Israeli border, which authorities have blamed on 'jihadists'.[14] Meanwhile, clashes with Al-Qaeda-linked Islamist militants continue in Yemen, especially in the Abyan Governorate, where in August 2012 a suicide bomber killed 45 members of a tribe loyal

to the regime. [15] Not all of these militants will be Al-Qaeda loyalists, of course, but it would be wrong to suggest the Arab Spring has ushered in the demise of Islamist-inspired violent extremism in the region.

The Arab revolutions, therefore, presented Al-Qaeda with significant problems but also potential opportunities. This article will explore the nature of Al-Qaeda's response to these events through analysing media communiqués distributed online. The focus is on material available in English, including most of Ayman Al-Zawahiri's output dedicated to the topic, much of which has been translated by Al-Qaeda activists and sympathisers themselves. The analysis is divided into two sections: the first explores the nature of the core leadership's response (this relates primarily to Zawahiri's statements on the matter) and the second discusses some additional media efforts by Al-Qaeda's affiliates and sympathisers.

The Core Leadership's Media Response

The core leadership of Al-Qaeda always valued the importance of engaging with the media or disseminating indigenous media output. In the post-9/11 period, this activity has become a central preoccupation of (what is left of) this core group. This review of the leadership's media response to the Arab Spring focuses in particular on the timing and nature of statements addressing these developments, but also on their content. In terms of the latter, emphasis is placed on exploring the way in which the Al-Qaeda leaders (primarily Zawahiri) presented the Arab revolutions to their audiences in the Middle East and elsewhere. In this regard, four major features emerged. First, Muslims were urged to see the revolutions as merely the first step in an on-going struggle for greater social justice. Second, the leaders purported to have a clear understanding of what the Arab publics genuinely wanted. Third, the masses were warned of the dangers that lay ahead if they strayed off the path prescribed by Al-Qaeda. Fourth, the messages reiterated Al-Qaeda's vision for the future as an alternative to whatever other forces might tempt or influence the Arab masses.

The Nature of the Al-Qaeda Leadership's Media Response

As noted above, the Al-Qaeda leadership's response to the initial events of the Arab Spring has been described as surprisingly slow. Although the Al-Qaeda leadership never came close to matching the almost instantaneous flow of information from the grassroots protests, As-Sahab, Al-Qaeda's chief media network, did publish a message from Ayman Al-Zawahiri less than a month after the Egyptian uprising began, which formed part of his on-going series of statements to the participants of the Arab revolutions. This series, which the Global Islamic Media Front translated as 'A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our Fellow Muslims in Egypt' (even though Zawahiri does not only address Egyptians) reached its tenth instalment in July 2012 and

constitutes, what Lahoud called, "the most comprehensive response to the events in the Middle East by a leading jihadist figure." [16] Leaders of Al-Qaeda affiliates and other Al-Qaeda leaders, such as Abu Yahya Al-Liby, also eventually responded to the revolutions, addressing Arab publics in specific geographic locations.

Perhaps aware of the criticism concerning the time it took the Al-Qaeda leadership to address the Arab masses, Zawahiri – in the fifth instalment of his 'Hope and Glad Tidings' series – struck an unusually humble tone in his appeal to Muslims in the region, asking them to be patient and appreciate the pressures the Al-Qaeda leadership was under from America and its allies:

My Muslim brothers, I ask your permission today to continue my talk, which might be long, because the events are occurring and changing rapidly, and I hope that our Muslim brothers realize that our speeches might be delayed a little or have longer intervals between them because of the fierce war in which the Mujahideen are clashing with the Americans. [17]

Overall, therefore, the delay in Al-Qaeda's response to the Arab Spring does not appear to be particularly problematic, especially when justified in light of the on-going struggle against America. When compared to the Al-Qaeda leadership's response to other seminal events affecting the *ummah*, its reaction to the Arab revolutions appears relatively quick. For example, the leadership's initial response to the publication of the Muhammad caricatures, which sparked widespread protests throughout the Muslim world, came six months after the cartoons were originally published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in September 2005 and three months after they were printed elsewhere, by which time the issue had become well known. Eventually, the Al-Qaeda leadership called for economic boycott of goods from Denmark and elsewhere, long after such initiatives had already been launched by others. [18]

The Revolutions are Only the First Step

Osama Bin Laden had issued only one public communiqué concerning the Arab Spring, before he was killed in Pakistan on 2 May 2011. His message, apparently written in April that year, was repackaged and published three weeks after his death. In the statement, Bin Laden congratulated those who had participated in the uprisings on their achievement, but warned them to "beware of dialogue". The revolutions were merely an "opportunity for advancing the Ummah and becoming liberated from serving the whims of the rulers, manmade laws, and Western domination". "The revolution was not one of food and clothing", bin Laden argued, "but one of dignity and defiance, a revolution of sacrifice and giving". Failure to grasp this opportunity and "establish justice and faith" after the revolution would be a great sin. [19]

Zawahiri has sought to frame the revolutions in the same way. He has emphasized that the work is far from complete. The *ummah* may have managed to topple the unjust rulers, but it must now ensure that a proper form of governance takes their place. Otherwise, everything will be lost.

"The Egyptian people's revolution succeeded in removing the tyrant", Zawahiri remarked, "and then what? And this is the dangerous question and the big challenge". [20] In a more recent instalment of the 'Hope and Glad Tidings Series', Zawahiri appealed to Egyptian Muslims:

> My Muslim brothers in Egypt, a corrupt ruler has been overthrown, but the corrupt governance is still ruling. The desired goal is not to come to power either with a free, strong government or a limited, weak one, but the aim is to rule by Islam. And wasting efforts by coming to power without ruling by Islam is disaster, but the greatest disaster is coming to power and then ruling by anything except Islam. [21]

So far, therefore, Egyptians had achieved only "partial gains" but risked "losing the basics." [22] The same applied to the other "noble and freeborn Muslims". They "must not suffice with merely removing the tyrant whose removal is an obligation, but rather they must continue their Jihad and struggle until an Islamic government is established which guarantees justice, freedom, and independence." [23] At this crucial juncture for the *ummah*, therefore, Zawahiri has made the case that further guidance is needed – which Al-Qaeda will provide – in order to steer the Muslim publics in the right direction.

What Prompted the Events according to Al-Qaeda?

Furthermore, like bin Laden, Zawahiri identified a set of grievances and prompters that he insists motivated those who took to the streets. Unsurprisingly, the issues mentioned reflect the core values of Al-Qaeda. "The hopes of the Muslim ummah", Zawahiri argued, were to establish an Islamic state that would liberate Palestine, "guard morality" and end corruption. [24] Zawahiri further insisted "the removal of the Israeli embassy is the main goal in the Egyptian revolution" [25] and that:

> The popular Arab uprisings proved to have an Islamic orientation in its greater part, and they rose up and raged against America's agents who wasted their lives in suppressing the Islamic orientation of their people under the guidance, support, and planning of America and those who have turned their countries into stations of torture, detention, and persecution within the Zionist-Crusader system. [26]

Whatever the facts on the ground, therefore, the Al-Qaeda leadership has identified a set of issues it argues contributed to the Arab revolutions that thus constitute the benchmarks of its success. An important component of this narrative is a complete rejection of alternative forms of governance and society to the version espoused by the Al-Qaeda leadership. As Nelly Lahoud noted in her analysis of the first five 'Hope and Glad Tidings' statements, there is a particular focus on the ills of democratic rule and secular governance. [27] References to the fallacy of democracy are, of course, an ever-present feature in the discourse of the Al-Qaeda leadership. These allusions, however, became particularly acute in the aftermath of the initial Arab uprisings.

Warnings of the Dangers that Lie Ahead

Zawahiri's warnings against democracy, moreover, appear to have evolved in his statements regarding the Arab Spring. Initially, he appeared to seek to nip any grassroots enthusiasm for democracy in the bud. Zawahiri then took to condemning some of the election results following successful revolutions and the course the new government appeared to be taking.

Although the Al-Qaeda leaders always voiced their animosity against democracy, the issue became particularly prominent in the leadership statements at the dawn of the Arab revolutions. Arabs were warned democracy was necessarily a *secular* form of governance [28] that "worships one idol, which is the wishes of the majority, without abiding by any religion, standards or ethics". [29] Any concessions towards a democratic form of government or consultation in this regard were also directly tied to the sacrificing of Islamic cultural prescriptions and proliferation of vice and degradation. "It is inconceivable for a fair and above board state to be established in Egypt", Zawahiri argued, "and yet accept the continuation of the use of impermissible wealth to freely trade the dignity and honour of Egyptians and turn Muslim and Arab Egypt to dissolute satellite channels, night clubs, gambling casinos, and nude beaches". [30] After all, "the truth about democracy [is that] it allows everything regardless of it being degrading or contradictory, as long as the majority agrees with it." [31]

In more recent communiqués, after successful elections, particularly in Tunisia, Zawahiri has reiterated his warnings against democracy and expressed his dissatisfaction with the results. The victory of *Ennahda* in Tunisia, appears to be of particular concern. Zawahiri condemned the mildly Islamist party as a "symptom of a modern day disease", accusing its leaders of "inventing" a version of Islam that would please the US Department of State, the European Union and the Gulf elite. This was "an Islam according to demand" which would allow "gambling, nude beaches, usurious banks, secular laws, and submission to international legitimacy". It was an Islam "without jihad". [32] In the message, entitled 'Oh People of Tunisia, Support Your Sharia', Zawahiri expressed his dismay over seeing "the leadership of a group that relates itself to Islam and then says it does not advocate ruling by it". [33]

Zawahiri's response to *Ennahda*'s victory in Tunisia may, perhaps, be indicative of how he plans to approach further consolidation of power by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, whose leadership he once accused of having "abandoned pursuing legitimate Muslim government in place of the current [secular] governments". [34]

As well as delivering warnings of the 'dangers' Islam supposedly faces in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, Zawahiri placed emphasis in his communiqués concerning these developments on elucidating the pious alternatives he felt the *ummah* should embrace. These conveyed the same bedrock principles the Al-Qaeda leaders have communicated in the past, but perhaps with a greater sense of urgency.

Al-Qaeda's Agenda for Change

"Be extremely cautious," Zawahiri warned, "that your sacrifices are not stolen, that your suffering is not used by others, and that outer appearances change, but injustice and servitude continues to exist." [35] Egyptians, in particular, would have to "restore to Egypt its leading role" as a "fortress of Islam", [36] lest all their efforts be for nothing. There were internal and external challenges, Zawahiri argued, that the *ummah* would have to address in order to ensure the uprisings ultimately brought positive benefits. Internally, there would have to be "legislative and judicial reforms," [37] with the Egyptian constitution for example being amended with the clause: "Islamic Shariah is the sole source of legislation, and all the articles of the constitution and the law which opposed it are null and void." [38] The amendments would also ensure only men could become heads of state. Furthermore, these legislative reforms would rid the region of what Zawahiri saw as a sinful society that permitted the production of alcohol and the running of nightclubs. [39] To respond to external challenges, Muslims were urged to embark upon a jihad against Israel and support the *mujahideen* fighting elsewhere in order to "free every inch of Palestine" and all the other Muslim lands. [40]

By citing these 'external challenges', Zawahiri sought to establish a connection between the localized Arab uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa with wider efforts involving Islamist insurgencies elsewhere and ultimately the United States and Western alliance. The Arab Spring, according to this interpretation, thus formed part of the global jihad being led by Al-Qaeda. In his message confirming the death of bin Laden, Zawahiri announced:

> We confirm to all the Muslim people that we are their soldiers, and we will not spare any effort, Allah willing, to liberate them from the occupiers in Kashmir, the Philippines, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Iraq, and Palestine. And we support their blessed uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. We are fighting a single battle with them against America and its servants. [41]

Seemingly conscious of the general consensus that the Arab Spring did not conform to Al-Qaeda's agenda, Zawahiri emphasized in his forth message of 'Hope and Glad Tidings' that "your brother Mujahideen are with you [the participants of the Arab uprisings], confronting the same enemy." [42] During the revolutions, Zawahiri felt compelled to remind Muslims that the *mujahideen* were part of the *ummah* and "were not alienated from its suffering." [43] In a more recent instalment of 'Hope and Glad Tidings', Zawahiri even seemed to revisit the notion that Al-Qaeda was indeed the *ummah's* pioneering vanguard, despite its absence during the Arab Spring: "Your sons, the mujahideen, are paving the way for the heralded change with their blessed strikes against the Global Crusader Alliance that has started to stagger due to their impact." [44]

The internal and external challenges that Zawahiri mentioned, therefore, could only be met if the *ummah*, under the leadership of Al-Qaeda and the *mujahideen*, continued to fight "until we see

the land of Islam all freed from the outer invasion and inner corruption, and united under the shadow [of] one Khilafa."[caliphate] [45] Focusing on Egypt, Zawahiri mentioned particular 'milestones' that needed to be fulfilled on the path towards holistic reform. These involved, first, the establishment of "shari'ah governance" since rule by shari'ah was key to "reforming politics, society and the economy". Second, Egyptians needed "freedom from foreign domination" and particularly from US and Western political and military subordination, to repudiate the peace treaty with Israel and help Palestinians by establishing "official offices in Egypt for all the jihadi movements whose activities are directed against Israel". Third, Egyptians needed to solve the "problem of poverty and social injustice", eliminate pay discrepancy and respect minimum wage. [46]

How could Al-Qaeda's supporters fight to see through these changes? Zawahiri, of course, used his 'Arab Spring' messages to reiterate the perceived importance and efficacy of Islamist militancy and terrorism in neutralizing enemies and disrupting the status quo. In addition, however, he urged further street gatherings and popular protests in order to confront obstacles to change.

Thus, Zawahiri urged Tunisians to take to the streets once more: "rise up to support your Shariah. Incite your people on a popular uprising to support the Shariah and affirm Islam and rule with the Qur'an". [47] Dissatisfied with Abd Rabbuh Mansur Al-Hadi, Ali Abdullah Saleh's former vice president, taking over as president of Yemen, Zawahiri appealed to Yemenis: "Oh, free Yemeni people and its honourable youth: there must be a popular, rising, aware, continuous movement against corruption which remains ruling." [48] Others, meanwhile, were urged to follow the example of the Arab revolutionaries and rise up against the government in a popular protest. Zawahiri appealed to Pakistanis, asking them to "rise up as did your brothers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. Shake off the dust of humiliation, and cast off those who sold you in the slave market to America". [49] The people of Saudi Arabia were criticized for "not moving" in the wake of the Arab uprisings and asked: "why don´t you follow the example of your brothers in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen and Ash-Sham?"[Syria] [50]

What is interesting here is Zawahiri's clear endorsement of popular uprising rather than an exclusive focus on armed jihadi groups as a force for change. Indeed, in the past, Zawahiri had dismissed popular protests as being useless.

In his 2006 statement "Realities of Conflict Between Islam and Unbelievers', for instance, Zawahiri insisted the only way to topple the ruling hierarchy would be violent jihad, anything less would be like **"**treating cancer with aspirin." [51] Addressing the situation in Egypt specifically, Zawahiri argued in a book he published in 2008 that there could be no peaceful solution to the problems of Egypt, especially after the authorities banned public protests after demonstrations by the Al-Azhar mosque in Cairo in February 2007. Instead, Muslims would have to focus on carefully planned attacks, seek funding and weapons in order to orchestrate

coordinated strikes and prepare martyrdom operations. Mere public protests were useless. [52] In a 2009 message to Palestinians, Zawahiri warned that "protests do no good in the face of bombs," Muslims must therefore take more "effective steps". [53] Revisiting the situation in Egypt that same year, Zawahiri insisted, "the system in Egypt and in most of the Arabic and Islamic countries cannot be removed except by force." [54]

Thus there exists a sharp contrast between Zawahiri's support for public protest in his most recent messages and his prior rhetoric where he dismissed such methods as futile. This inconsistency could seriously undermine the impact of this message from the Al-Qaeda leadership. Indeed, as James Forest discussed, efforts have already been made to compare the events during the Arab Spring with Zawahiri's denunciation of street protests. The Centre for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, situated within the US Department of State, for instance, produced a video, which it posted on YouTube, showing footage of Egyptian protesters celebrating Mubarak's resignation which was edited together with excerpts from one of Zawahiri's addresses where he stated "there is no hope to remove the corrupt regimes in Muslim countries except by force" and that no examples could be cited to prove him wrong. [55]

Interestingly, the wider network of Al-Qaeda sympathizers appears to have been engaging in its own damage control efforts in order to represent Al-Qaeda's stance as having always been supportive of public uprising and protests and presenting Al-Qaeda as a noble and righteous defensive vanguard protecting the interests of the Muslim *ummah.* These affiliates and media outlets have effectively being trying to catch up with events whilst presenting the way in which they unfolded as conforming to Al-Qaeda's worldview and agenda.

The next section discusses some of the efforts made by Al-Qaeda affiliates, associates and sympathizers to respond to the Arab Spring.

Damage Control: Broader Media Efforts by Al-Qaeda and its Affiliates

One prominent example of these efforts by the wider community of Al-Qaeda loyalists is the fifth issue of Al-Malahem's *Inspire* magazine, which became available in spring 2011. The issue is largely dedicated to the Arab Spring, but also to efforts designed to dispel some of the criticism and 'counter-narratives' against Al-Qaeda that emerged after the Arab uprisings. [56]

For instance, the 'Letter from the Editor' by 'Yahya Ibrahim' sought to counter notions that "the revolts are bad for al Qaeda". "This is not the case," the editor insisted. "Why would the freedoms being granted to the people be bad for al Qaeda? If freedom is so bad for al Qaeda," he asked, "how come the West has been practicing a restriction on the freedoms of expression when it comes to the message of the mujahidin?" Responding to accusations Al-Qaeda had previously dismissed the efficacy of public protests and the ability of the Arab publics to force through change peacefully, the letter argued: "Another line that is being pushed by Western leaders is that

because the protests in Egypt and Tunisia were peaceful, they proved al Qaeda – which calls for armed struggle – to be wrong. That is another fallacy." Al-Qaeda is "not against regime changes through protests but it is against the idea that change should be only through peaceful means to the exclusion of force", the editor argued. To support his case, he cited both the conflict that ensued in Libya (ignoring the support rebels received from NATO) and Zawahiri's support for "the protests that swept Egypt back in 2007" where the latter "alluded to the fact that even if the protests were peaceful, the people need to prepare themselves militarily." [57]

As if in an attempt to rewrite its own history, perhaps hoping not many remembered Zawahiri's prior denunciation of public protests as a method for regime change, *Inspire* republished an excerpt from one of his communiqués from 2007 (entitled 'The Advice of One Concerned' at the time) under the heading 'The Short & Long-term Plans after Protests'. In the statement, Zawahiri urged Egyptians to "rise up and demonstrate" against police brutality and unlawful arrests, suggesting people could "besiege the police station" in question or "take to the streets in mass protests" to force the government to give in. [58]

Although clearly endorsing public protests, the context for Zawahiri was an immediate grassroots response to a specific grievance, not regime change. For the latter, even in this statement, Zawahiri still called for groups to attack "Crusader-Jewish interests", asking – in the long term – for greater public support for the "Islamic mujahid movement", lead by Al-Qaeda, as a force for change. [59] The inclusion of this statement thus appears to be part of an effort by the editors of *Inspire* to gloss over Zawahiri's unequivocal dismissal of public protests as a force for fundamental change and removal of regimes.

Other contributions to the 'special' section on the Arab Spring in the fifth issue of *Inspire* reiterated the point made by Zawahiri in his 'Hope and Glad Tidings' messages, insisting Arabs had only completed the first stage of a long process towards holistic reform. The essential next step would be to sever links with the West and Israel, counter their influence through force and implement shari'ah law as the governing principle of state and society. The late Samir Khan, for instance, who created *Inspire*, warned Egyptians that the revolutions were not the "end goal" [60] whilst Ibrahim Al-Rubaish (of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) thought the revolutions would bring "slight reforms like some aspects of freedom and increases of income" but that all would be lost if man-made laws were not abrogated and rule by *shari'ah* not implemented. [61] Interestingly, the excerpt from Al-Rubaish's address (which was first published February 2011 under the title 'Ben Ali and Ibn Saud') that featured in *Inspire*, left out the part of his statement where he endorsed Al-Qaeda affiliates and allies as leaders in the Arab uprisings. Al-Rubaish, in his original address, asked that power be handed to "the likes of the Mujahid, [Afghan-Taliban leader] Mullah Muhammad Umar, [Al-Qaeda in Iraq leader] Abu Umar Al Bahghdadi and other similar Muslim leaders" who could implement God's law. In this respect, he suggested Al-Qaeda's affiliate Al-Shabaab in Somalia was the correct example for Arabs to follow in the post-revolution societies. [62]

Other Al-Qaeda affiliates, such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), followed this common thread that various components of Al-Qaeda developed in reaction to the Arab Spring. A communiqué from AQIM addressing Tunisians issued in February 2011, for instance, reminded them that they "should not think that they have won the battle with Kufr [infidelity] and transgression. The battle is a long one and is still in its early stages. Whatever they have gained is only the first round. There are many rounds left. This included tackling, what AQIM argued was the "root cause" of their problems, the pervasive influence of the Crusader West. [63]

As well as seeking to convince Muslims and Arabs that the uprisings were only the first step, *Inspire* 5 contains some remarkable attempts to re-write history by suggesting that Al-Qaeda was not caught off guard during these seminal events and that the group was, in fact, at the helm of the broader revolutionary movement. Abu Suhail suggested that: "If this Egyptian revolution has taught us anything, it has taught us that sitting and waiting for tyrants to fall is not practical; mobilization of the people is necessary for the tyrants to give in." "This," Suhail insisted, "is what your brothers in the al Qaeda Organization and other jihadi organizations have been working for." The Arab Spring had, in fact, "proved that al Qaeda's rage is shared by the millions of Muslims across the world whether they are in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, Yemen or elsewhere." [64]

Anwar Al-Awlaki's attempts to present the Arab uprisings in a positive light for Al-Qaeda were more sophisticated. His essay, titled 'The Tsunami of Change', reminded readers of the close relationship the West had had with the toppled dictatorships and how quickly Western leaders had abandoned their former allies once they appreciated the scale of the protests. Rejecting suggestions the events were bad for Al-Qaeda, Awlaki insisted: "We do not know yet what the outcome 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." To begin with, the system of total oppression and control had been dismantled, giving the *mujahideen* more space to manoeuvre. [65] Indeed, as noted at the beginning of this article, some areas in the region have seen heightened jihadi activity as a result of turmoil and reduced levels of government surveillance and control.

Whereas *Inspire* and other Al-Qaeda-linked outlets have sought to convince its public that the Arab Spring fully conformed with Al-Qaeda's strategy and that the group remains at the pinnacle of resistance against corruption, subjugation and vice, other Al-Qaeda 'spokespersons' have adopted a different approach, recognizing the challenges the uprisings present for Al-Qaeda, almost excusing the group's absence during these events. For example, 'Sheikh Atiyyatullah' (Jamal Ibrahim Ishtaywi al-Misrati), a veteran of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, issued a communiqué on behalf of Al-Qaeda in March 2011 in response to the on-going events of the Arab Spring where he admitted: "It is true that it [the Arab Spring] is not the best and not exactly as we had hoped, but the removal of some evil or much evil is something which pleases to all people. We hope that this is a good step ahead for even more good in the future".

Regarding criticism of Al-Qaeda's inability to see through change as envisaged in its rhetoric, Atiyyatullah reminded people that "Al-Qaedah does not have a "magic wand" as they say." "Al-Qaeda is only a small part of this striving and Mujahid Ummah," Atiyyatullah continued. "Do not overestimate it. We should all know our abilities, and let us aid each other in piousness, righteousness and in making Jihad in the way of Allah." [66]

Looking towards the future, a publication by 'Abdullah bin Mohammed', entitled *Valuable Collection for the Strategic Memorandum Series*, sought to assess the impact of the Arab Spring on the region and on Al-Qaeda. This collection of essays was published in the spring of 2011 by Al-Ma'sada Media Publications. Touching upon a number of issues, the author argued the Arab uprisings presented tremendous opportunities that Al-Qaeda could exploit. He compared the events to the Battle of Bu'ath in 617, when two Arab tribes from Yathrib (Medina) fought each other, resulting in heightened tensions and mutual animosity that preceded the prophet Mohammed's *hijrah* to the city and the advent of Islam. [67] After the Battle of Bu'ath, Abdullah bin Mohammed argued, "the balance of power in Medina was upset to open the way for any young power that could lead and would be able to fill the vacuum." The same was happening in the Middle East and North Africa today. The "exceptional state of solidarity" that emerged during the uprisings themselves was dissipating and anarchy was looming. The "small and scattered" jihadist movement had to become united, Mohammed argued, in order to exploit this period and pursue a "common purpose". [68]

What was needed, therefore, was a comprehensive alliance of jihadi movements in order to exploit the vacuum and turmoil in the wake of the Arab Spring. For Al-Qaeda to be successful in this endeavour, however, Muhammed argued the group would have to alter its image, in part due to its association with excessive targeting and killing of Muslims (from which Zawahiri himself has sought to disassociate Al-Qaeda in his recent messages). Muhammed wrote in one of his essays in the series:

> Since the discussion has led us to alliances that could serve us during the upcoming phase, I have been wondering since the outbreak of the Arab revolutions if it is good for us to continue with the name al-Qaeda or will the next phase require a new name? The answer came from al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula when it entered into tribal alliances and changed its name to Ansar al-Shariah in order to acclimate and benefit from the new circumstances. For the sake of any expansion we want to achieve, we must forsake any cloak that others cannot wear. I add to that, if we don't want to avoid reality, we should acknowledge that this name has been tarnished by unprecedented disinformation campaigns through all these years alongside the gains and support that it had accomplished in the Islamic street. In order for us not to gamble the chances of our success in the coming phase because of the existence of old ideas in the minds of some, and in order to cut off the means of those who want to exploit these old ideas to turn the masses of people away from us, we must enter this phase under a new inclusive name.[69]

Conclusions

The Arab Spring presented immense challenges for Al-Qaeda, to which it has sought to respond in various communiqués and media initiatives. These initiatives have attempted to present a version of the events that conforms to Al-Qaeda's strategy and broader agenda, whilst leaving plenty of scope for further strategic direction from Al-Qaeda leaders in the future. Desperate to seem relevant to those who took to the streets in protest against the ruling regimes and eager to exploit inevitable disillusionment following the Arab Spring, the Al-Qaeda leadership and affiliates continue to issue communiqués appealing to Arab publics.

Both the leadership and various affiliates and sympathisers have argued that the revolutions merely constitute the first step in a long process towards reform. Dismissing notions that the uprisings proved Al-Qaeda's tactical prescriptions to be irrelevant, Al-Qaeda has tried to present guidelines to the post-revolution societies regarding the next steps.

Conscious of the current turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa, various components of Al-Qaeda hope to be able to consolidate amid the lawlessness and power vacuums that have emerged in some regions following successful revolutions and in areas experiencing on-going conflict. Equally aware, however, of Al-Qaeda's increasing marginalisation, the group's media publications continue to strive to present jihadism as the most appropriate way to protect collective interests, eliminate adversaries, eradicate vice and establish a zealously pious social order.

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Notes

[1] See e.g. Jason Burke (2011) *The 9/11 Wars*, Allen Lane, London, p. 485.

[2] James J.F. Forest (2012) 'Perception Challenges Faced by Al-Qaeda on the Battlefield of Influence Warfare" in *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 6, Issue 1, March, p.18.

[3] Alex S. Wilner. (2011) 'Opportunity Costs or Costly Opportunities? The Arab Spring, Osama Bin Laden, and Al-Qaeda's African Affiliates' in *Perspectives on Terrorism,* Vol. 5, Issues 3 - 4, September, p. 55.

[4] _A.S. Wilner (2011), op. cit.; Nelly Lahoud (2011) 'Ayman al-Zawahiri's Reaction to Revolution in the Middle East' in *CTC Sentinel,* Vol. 4, No. 4.

[5] J. Burke (2011), op. cit., p. 486; Analysis Intelligence (2011) 'Al-Qaeda's Democratic Conundrum' (17 March), see, http://analysisintelligence.com/tag/yemen [as of 2 August 2012].

[6] See e.g. J. Burke (2011), op. cit, p. 485; Fawaz A. Gerges (2011) *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda*, Oxford University Press, pp. 4 - 5; Rob Crilly (2012) 'Osama bin Laden's death put al-Qaeda in irreversible decline', *The Telegraph* (1 August).

[7] Juan Z. Zarate. (2011) 'Al Qaeda Stirs Again' in *The New York Times,* 17 April.

[8] A. Wilner (2011), op. cit., p. 57.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Nick Hopkings (2012) 'MI5 warns Al-Qaeda regaining UK toehold after Arab spring', in *The Guardian* , 25 June.

[11] See e.g. the 'Defender of the Lands' blog http://defenderofthelands.blogspot.co.uk/2012/08/the-land-of-patience-and-jihad-battle.html [as of 2 August 2012].

[12] Neil MacFarquhar and Hwaida Saad (2012) 'As Syrian War Drags On, Jihadists Take Bigger Role' in *The New York Times* , 29 July.

[13] At the time of writing (Dec. 2012), approximately 60 statements from Jabhat An-Nusra were available on Islamist extremist websites.

[14] See e.g. BBC (2012) 'Egyptian police killed in attack on Israeli border', 6 August; http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19142882 [as of 6 August 2012).

[15] *The Guardian* (2012) 'Yemen Suicide Bombing Kills 45 at a Village Funeral', 5 August; http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/aug/05/yemen-suicide-bombing-funeral?newsfeed=true [as of 6 August]

[16] N. Lahoud (2011) , op. cit., p. 4.

[17] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2011) 'A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt: Part 5'; distributed by As-Sahab (14 April), translated by Global Islamic Media Front, available from Islamist extremist web forum.

[18] The first of the Al-Qaeda leadership's responses to the cartoon issue was Zawahiri's message 'The Alternative is Da'wa and Jihad' (March 2006), the matter was dealt with in a few subsequent communiqués, including bin Laden's 'Oh, People of Islam' (April 2006) and Zawahiri's 'Bush, the Vatican's Pope, Darfur and the Crusades' (September 2006).

[19] Osama Bin Laden (2011) 'The Last Speech of the Martyr of Islam - as we see him - "To The Muslim Ummah", published by As-Sahab (19 May), translated by the Global Islamic Media Front.

[20] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2011) 'A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt: Part 5'.

[21] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2012) 'A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt,:Part 9: Why did we Rebel Against Him?', distributed by Al-Fajr Media Center (19 February), translated by the Global Islamic Media Front.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2011) 'A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt Part 4', distributed by As-Sahab (4 March), translated by the Global Islamic Media Front.

[24] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2011) 'A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt: Part 3', distributed by As-Sahab (27 February), translated by the Global Islamic Media Front.

[25] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2011) 'Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt ;part 8: And what About the American Hostage Warren Weinstein', distributed and translated by As-Sahab and Al-Masadh Media (December).

[26] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2012) 'A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt Part 9: Why did we Rebel Against Him?'

[27] N. Lahoud, op.cit. (2011).

[28] See e.g. Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2011) 'A Message of Hope and Glad tidings to our people in Egypt: Part 1,' published by As-Sahab (19 February), translated by the Global Islamic Media Front.

[29] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2011) 'A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt: Part 4'.

[30] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2012) 'A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt; Part 9: Why did we Rebel Against Him?'

[31] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2011) 'A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt; Part 5'.

[32] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2012) 'Oh People of Tunisia, Support Your Sharia', distributed by As-Sahab (10 June), transcript available from Flashpoint Partners.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Zawahiri, A. Al (1991) The Bitter Harvest: The Brotherhood in Sixty Years , translation in R. Ibrahim (2007) Al Qaeda Reader , Broadway Books, New York and G. Kepel & J.P. Milelli (2008) (ds.) Al Qaeda in its Own Words (2008). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

[35] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2011) 'A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt: Part 3'.

[36] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2011) 'Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt: Part 8: And what About the American Hostage Warren Weinstein'.

[37] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2011)' Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt: Part 6'; distributed by As-Sahab (21 May). English transcript available from the NEFA foundation.

[38] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2011) 'A Message of Hope and Glad tidings to our people in Egypt: Part 7', distributed by As-Sahab (9 August), translated by the Global Islamic Media Front.

[39] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2011)' Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt: Part 6'.

[40] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2012) 'Move Forward, O Lions of Sham', distributed by As-Sahab and Al-Fajr (12 February), translated by the Global Islamic Media Front.

[41] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2011) 'The Noble Knight Dismounted', distributed by As-Sahab (8 June), translated by the Global Islamic Media Front.

[42] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2011) 'A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt: Part 4.'

[43] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2011) 'Do Not become Weak nor Grieve', distributed by As-Sahab (15 August), transcript available from the NEFA foundation.

[44] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2011) 'A Message of Hope and Glad tidings to our people in Egypt: Part 7'.

[45] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2011) 'Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt: Part 8: And what About the American Hostage Warren Weinstein'.

[46] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2012) 'A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt; Part 9: Why did we Rebel Against Him?'.

[47] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2012) 'Oh People of Tunisia, Support Your Sharia', distributed by As-Sahab (10 June).

[48] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2012) 'Yemen: Between a Fugitive Puppet and his new Replacement', distributed by As-Sahab (15 May), transcript available from Flashpoint Partners.

[49] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2011) 'The Noble Knight Dismounted'.

[50] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2012) 'To Our People in the Place of the Revelation and the Cradle of Islam', distributed by As-Sahab (18 May), translated by Fursan Al-Balagh Media.

[51] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2006) 'Realities of the Conflict Between Islam and Unbelief' ; published by As-Sahab (22 December), available from IntelCenter (2008); Words of Ayman al-Zawahiri Vol. 1. Tempest Publishing, Alexandria, VA

[52] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2008) *Exoneration: A Letter Exonerating the Ummah of the Pen and the Sword from the Unjust Allegation of Feebleness and Weakness*, advertised by As-Sahab early in 2008.

[53] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2009) 'The Massacre of Gaza and the Siege of the Traitors,' published by As-Sahab (6 January), translated by Global Islamic Media Front.

[54] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2009) 'The Realities of Jihad and Fallacy of Hypocrisy,' published by As-Sahab (4 August), secured from Islamist web forums. Transcript also available from the NEFA foundation.

[55] James J.F. Forest, (2012), op. cit.

[56] Subsequent issues of *Inspire* (issues 7 and 8) moreover advertised a forthcoming interview with Adam Gadahn titled 'The Arab Intifada: Hopes, Concerns & Dangers'; however, it was not included in the ninth and final issue of the magazine.

[57] Yahya Ibrahim (2011) 'Letter from the Editor: Protest Focus Spring 2011', published in *Inspire*, by Al-Malahem Media, distributed online in spring 2011: page 5.

[58] Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2007) "The Advice of One Concerned", republished in *Inspire,* I 5, Spring 2011; published by Al-Malahem.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Shamir Khan (2011) 'The Egyptian', published in *Inspire* , Issue 5, Spring 2011, p. 45.

[61] Ibrahim Al-Rubaish (2011) 'Al-Saud: Lodging a Criminal' in *Inspire,* Issue 5, Spring 2011, p. 47.

[62] Ibrahim Al-Rubaish (2011) 'Ben Ali and Ibn Saud', published and translated by Al-Malahim Media (26 February).

[63] Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (2011) 'To Our Fellow Muslims in Tunisia: The Taghoot has Fled, but the Infidelic and Taghooti System Remains',;statement issued online in February 2011**.**

[64] Abu Suhail (2011) 'The Way Forward' in *Inspire*, Iissue 5, Spring 2011, p. 43.

[65] Anwar Al-Awlaki (2011) 'The Tsunami of Change' in *Inspire,* Issue 5, Spring 2011, pp. 50-53.

[66] Sheikh Atiyyatullah (2011) 'The People's Revolt… the Fall of the Corrupt Arab Regime… the Demolishment of the Idol of Stability… and the New Beginning', communiqué distributed online in March, translated by Ansarnet.

[67] e.g Michael Lecker (2003) 'King Ibn Ubayy and the Qussas', in Herbert Berg (Ed.) *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins*. Leiden: Brill, p. 40. See further on consequences of the Battle of Bu'ath (pp. 39-48).

[68] Abdullah bin Mohammed (2011) *Valuable Collection for the Strategic Memorandum Series*, published by Al-Ma'sada Media Publications, distributed by Ansarnet: quotes from first essay, 'Strategic Memorandum [1]'.

[69] Ibid: taken from 'Strategic Memorandum [3]'.