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## Three Years After: Islamism's Ambiguous Prospects

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On December 3, 2013, *al-Sharq al-Awsat* [published a political cartoon](#) featuring three creatures: two of them, symbolizing 2013 and 2014, were trapeze artists swinging a third creature between them. The third creature, "the Arab Spring," slipped from the 2013 creature's hands while the 2014 creature makes a futile attempt to catch it. Indeed, three years after the eruption of the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain, their outcomes are still pending. Egypt is threatened by the return of violence and economic crisis, following the restoration of a military-dominated regime. In Libya, a weak coalition government is unable to govern or control the hundreds of militias that have mushroomed since Qaddafi's fall. Yemen and Syria are torn by sectarian wars and terrorism. Only Tunisia, following the adoption of a new constitution after two years of negotiations between the Islamist and secular bloc and the establishment of technocratic government, has achieved tangible success and avoided sliding into civil strife. However, the cartoon not only reflects the gloomy outcomes of the Arab Spring uprisings but also the ambiguous situation of Islamist movements, who initially seemed to be the big winners, from the Muslim Brotherhood, to *al-Qa'ida* affiliated jihadist groups and "*al-Qa'ida* Central."

In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood came to power democratically, through the ballot box in 2012, more than 80 years after its founding and following decades of repression. However, a year later it lost much of the public's trust, and on July 3, 2013 president Muhammad Morsi was removed from office by a resurgent military leadership backed by massive popular protests. While in office the Brotherhood sought to implement their long-term radical agenda, as had been forecast by the Hudson Institute's Samuel Tadros. The Brotherhood's declared

commitment to democratic rule proved to be merely tactical.<sup>1</sup> It attempted to appropriate the powers of the Egyptian state structure and exclude all other political elements, and in the process alienated secular and salafi supporters alike. It also failed to stop the country's economic deterioration. The Muslim Brotherhood's failure exposed internal divisions within the movement as well as its inclination to violence.<sup>2</sup> Faced with the renewed ban on its activities and its designation as a terrorist organization, the Brotherhood appealed to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in London to take action against the Egyptian authorities, an act that was contrary to its underlying views but demonstrated its desperation.<sup>3</sup>

The Brotherhood's Tunisian counterpart, *al-Nahda*, committed similar mistakes in power, and turned a blind eye to the activity of the militant *Ansar al-Shari'a* group. But after realizing its mistakes, it sought to come to terms with other political and cultural movements, favoring the welfare of the state over the party's narrow, short-term interests. In January 2014, it relinquished the premiership, and forged an agreement with non-Islamist factions on a new constitution in advance of general elections. By doing so, according to liberal Lebanese commentator Hazim Saghiya, it saved itself and strengthened the prospects for political stability during Tunisia's crucial transitional phase.<sup>4</sup>

The crackdown on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood weakened the movement's branches across the region – for example, the Palestinian Hamas and the Islamic Front in Jordan – but strengthened *al-Qa'ida* inspired Egyptian Islamist groups, such as *Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis*. Until Morsi's fall, these groups confined their terrorist activities to the Sinai Peninsula but subsequently intensified their activities against military targets in Sinai and against individual officials and public spaces in Egypt's Nile heartland.<sup>5</sup> Since Morsi's overthrow, there have been 260 terror attacks in the Sinai Peninsula alone, according to the Brookings Institute's Bruce Riedel, and more are taking place in Egyptian cities every day. Riedel claims that *al-Qa'ida's* brightest prospects are probably in Egypt, because the restoration of military dictatorship is driving the extremists in the

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Tadros, "Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood After the Revolution," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Volume 12, October 18, 2011, <http://www.currenttrends.org/research/detail/egypts-muslim-brotherhood-after-the-revolution>.

<sup>2</sup> *al-Safir*, January 28, 2014, <http://www.assafir.com/#!/ArticleWindow.aspx?ChannelID=1&ArticleID=335730>; *al-Ahram Weekly*, December 19, 2013, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/4983/21/Abusive-opposition.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> Reham Mokbel, "Egypt's Brotherhood appeals to International Criminal Court," *Al-Monitor*, January 20, 2014, <http://www.almonitor.com/pulse/fa/contents/articles/originals/2014/01/egypt-brotherhood-internationalize-cause-icc.html>.

<sup>4</sup> *al-Hayat*, October 8, 2013, <http://alhayat.com/OpinionsDetails/559620>.

<sup>5</sup> *al-Hayat*, November 23, 2013, <http://alhayat.com/home/Print/575117?PrintPictures=0>.

Muslim Brotherhood through *al-Qa'ida's* open doors and validating the movement's ideology and narrative in the eyes of jihadists everywhere.<sup>6</sup>

The removal of Morsi gave Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama Bin Ladin's successor as head of *al-Qa'ida* Central since June 2011, an opportunity to reiterate his belief in *jihad* as the only way for regime change in Egypt. Morsi's ousting, he stated, provided proof that Islamic rule could not be established through democracy, and he urged his followers to abandon the ballot box in favor of armed resistance. He also criticized Islamists for losing power in Egypt and not uniting to implement *shari'a*. He concluded by declaring defiantly that "the battle isn't over, it has just started...the Islamic nation should offer victims and sacrifices to achieve what it wants and restore power from the corrupt authority governing Egypt."<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, the battle is not over, and has in fact been raging in numerous spots throughout the Middle East and Africa, as the Islamic umma (or community of Muslims) is "offering up victims and sacrifices" on a daily basis. *Al-Qa'ida*-affiliated groups have sought to fill the vacuum created by weakened state authority across the region and create operational bases across the Arab world. They have expanded their activities in weak and failed states, such as Yemen and Libya, and in states where civil war has erupted, such as Syria, and now in Egypt.

Syria seems to have turned into a magnet for jihadist groups, perhaps even replacing Afghanistan, says Riedel, and *al-Qa'ida*-affiliates have emerged throughout the Fertile Crescent. In Iraq, where it was wrongly proclaimed as defeated by the U.S. "surge" in 2007, *al-Qa'ida* has reemerged and is more deadly than ever under the banner of the *Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sha'm* (ISIS)[*al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-Iraq wal-Sham* or, its acronym, "*daesh*"].<sup>8</sup> ISIS gave birth to a Syrian franchise, *Jabhat al-Nusra li ahl al-Sham* ("Support Front for the Greater Syrian People"), which boasts of having attracted 15,000-20,000 fighters from across the Muslim world, including a few hundred from Europe.

ISIS arrived in Syria to help the Syrian rebels remove Bashar al-Asad's regime, but soon found itself at odds with the other rebel groups. Its followers attacked rebel bases to capture supplies and seized control of scattered areas in the north

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce Riedel, "The continuing evolution of al-Qaeda 3.0," *Al-Monitor*, January 3, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/01/al-qaeda-terror-spread-iraq-lebanon.html##ixzz2s4xzv1Pj>.

<sup>7</sup> *Associated Press*, August 3, 2013, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/al-qaeda-leader-egypts-morsi-abandoned-jihad-19860482>; [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/03/ayman-al-zawahri-egypt\\_n\\_3701385.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/03/ayman-al-zawahri-egypt_n_3701385.html); *Daily News*, August 6, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Riedel, "The continuing evolution of al-Qaeda 3.0," *Al-Monitor*, January 3, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/01/al-qaeda-terror-spread-iraq-lebanon.html##ixzz2s4xzv1Pj>.

of Syria, forcefully competing with *Jabhat al-Nusra*, its own offspring, and imposing its Islamist Taliban-like values in areas under its control. Moreover, it collided with Hizballah forces and tried to export the civil war into Lebanon by carrying out terrorist attacks, thus exacerbating Sunni-Shi'i sectarian violence. In the beginning of January 2014, ISIS was dealt a severe blow by the Islamic Front and had to withdraw from many of its outposts in northern Syria.

Striving to remain relevant and reinforce his authority over the organization's affiliated groups, Ayman al-Zawahiri intervened in May 2013 to resolve a dispute between the emir of *Jabhat al-Nusra*, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, and the emir of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who had announced the merger of the two groups a few weeks earlier, claiming that the Front was "merely an extension and part of the Islamic State of Iraq." Julani had rejected Baghdadi's move and reaffirmed his oath of allegiance to Zawahiri directly, although he previously operated in ISIS. In a letter issued on May 23, 2013 and publicized two weeks later, Zawahiri ruled against the merger, called on members of both groups to refrain from infighting, and named Abu Khalid al-Suri, a Syrian commander from Aleppo and a longtime *al-Qa'ida* operative sprung from a Syrian prison following the rebellion's outbreak in 2011, as a personal emissary "to oversee the implementation" of the accord [on February 23, it was announced that al-Suri had been killed in a suicide attack by ISIS].<sup>9</sup>

Al-Baghdadi defied Zawahiri again in January 2014, when he was directed to withdraw his forces from Syria. Subsequently, Zawahiri repudiated ISIS, which, in turn, broke with *al-Qa'ida* Central at the beginning of February.<sup>10</sup> *Al-Qa'ida* Central has experienced similar problems with *al-Shabaab* in Somalia and *al-Qa'ida* in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Zawahiri's control over the disparate and diffuse operations of *al-Qa'ida*-affiliated, or inspired, groups and individuals remains limited. William McCants, director of the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World at the Brookings Institution even argues that Zawahiri has mismanaged *al-Qa'ida*, and that the global jihad movement has turned on itself. "Paradoxically," he wrote, "one major reason that al Qaeda affiliates are not getting along is the great many opportunities before them... As they move in, they often disagree about who is in charge."<sup>11</sup> In any case, Zawahiri's recent moves seem to suggest that he has tried to exploit the persistent internal fractures and infighting between the jihadist groups in Syria and elsewhere to reassert his own authority.

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<sup>9</sup> *The Long War Journal*, June 10, 2013, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/06/analysis\\_alleged\\_let.php#ixzz2bq4kZGX](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/06/analysis_alleged_let.php#ixzz2bq4kZGX); *al-Jazeera*, June 9, 2013, <http://m.aljazeera.com/story/2013699425657882>.

<sup>10</sup> *Washington Post*, February 3; *Daily Star*, *Haaretz*, February 4, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> William McCants, "How Zawahiri Lost al Qaeda. global jihad turned on itself," *Foreign Affairs*, November 19, 2013, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/140273/william-mccants/how-zawahiri-lost-al-qaeda>.

Analysts are divided as to the Islamists' future prospects. Some have declared that "the Arab Spring had been killed,"<sup>12</sup> that Islamism "is conquering the world,"<sup>13</sup> and has "seized back the crucial edge in the battle for the soul of Islam."<sup>14</sup> Others draw comfort from the divisions and internecine hostilities among Islamists, and claim that Islamism is in disarray.<sup>15</sup> Three years after the outbreak of the Arab uprisings, jihadist groups are prima facie emerging as the primary beneficiaries of the revolutionary upheaval, although it is too early to determine whether the fate of the revolutions and the Arab states has been sealed.

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Ghasan Shirbil, "Man qatala 'al-rabi'," *al-Hayat*, December 16, 2013, <http://alhayat.com/OpinionsDetails/582564>.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Croitoru, "Bualem Sansal's Essay on Islamisation. Fighting Islamists with Conspiracy Theories," January 27, 2014, <http://en.qantara.de/print/17486>.

<sup>14</sup> Memri, "Indian Columnist Hasan Suroor on 'Existential Crisis Facing Islam'," Special Dispatch No. 5617, January 26, 2014, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/840/7781.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> See for example, Daniel Pipes, "Islamism Likely Doom," *The Washington Times*, July 22, 2013, <http://p.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/jul/22/islamisms-likely-doom/>; and "Islamism is in disarray," January 3, 2014, <http://www.danielpipes.org/blog/2013/10/islamism-in-disarray>.