



Jihadist Islam and the Arab Spring

Al-Qaida has demonstrated an ability to adapt, and even reshape itself, while retaining its appeal in some Muslim circles

IT IS now three years since the beginning of the “Arab Spring” upheavals that have roiled the region. Early on, many analysts argued that the massive public protests in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere constituted a definitive rejection of the al-Qaida ideology of waging violent jihad against corrupt Arab regimes and their Western backers. Indeed, Osama bin Laden’s former popularity, as measured by public opinion polls, had already declined sharply by then. Hence, at first glance, his liquidation in May 2011 seemed to herald the organization’s demise.

However, as my Dayan Center colleague Esther Webman demonstrates in a forthcoming publication, the organization has demonstrated an ability to adapt, and even reshape itself, while maintaining a core message that retains its appeal in some Muslim circles. Moreover, the subsequent breakdown of order across the Middle East and North Africa, and concomitant sharpening of the age-old Sunni-Shi’ite fault line in the Muslim world, has provided new arenas and opportunities for al-Qaida and like-minded Sunni jihadist groups, from Iraq and Syria to Yemen, Sinai and across North and East Africa.

A glance at recent news reports highlights their continued presence. In Yemen, where al-Qaida of the Arabian Peninsula established roots in whole swaths of the country, and even assumed governmental-like functions before being driven on the defensive by US-backed Yemeni government forces, a coordinated bombing attack on the Defense Ministry compound killed at least 52 persons and injured more than 160. In Iraq, waves of attacks on Shi’ites have killed more than 260 people in December alone. In Syria, where al-Qaida-like affiliates have become the central players in the country’s brutal civil war, Sunni Islamist fighters reportedly massacred anywhere between 10 and 80 members of minority groups in the Damascus suburb of Adra. Farther afield, jihadists in northern Mali who had been previously pushed back by French forces killed two UN peacekeepers with a car bomb, after having kidnapped and executed two French journalists in November. And back in September, the Somali jihadist al-Shabaab group demonstrated its continued potency in the deadly Westgate mall attack in Nairobi.

The 2004-2007 chaos of post-Saddam Iraq, and the loss of Sunni hegemony to Iraq’s long-deprived Shi’ites in particular, served as a magnet for al-Qaida in its “Mesopotamian” version. Not surprisingly, the ever-more-brutal, no-holds-barred conflict in Syria has similarly become the focal point for Sunni jihadists. Indeed, according to the Middle East Media Research Institute, the al-Qaida leadership in Afghanistan-Pakistan is upgrading its involvement in Syria, and particularly with Jabhat al-Nusra, the leading faction there.

A number of recent analyses shed light on international aspects of the Syrian jihadist phenomenon. A Saban Center study by Elizabeth Dickinson asserts that hundreds of millions of dollars from wealthy Gulf Arabs have flowed into Syria to support the rebellion. Each nascent rebel group posted a representative in Kuwait to solicit funds, with Syrian expatriates providing facilitation services.

At least one of the Kuwaiti groups providing the funds is currently under US Treasury sanctions for supporting terrorism. According to the report, some members of Kuwait’s Shi’ite community are similarly raising funds for pro-regime elements. Indeed, both Lebanese and Iraqi Shi’ites have mirrored their Sunni counterparts in

joining the struggle for Syria, further sharpening its sectarian aspect.

The flow of foreign fighters from the Arab world into Syria and beyond has been considerable. The International Center for the Study of Radicalization estimates the total number (including returnees and fatalities) as 8,500-11,000 (some 10 percent of the total number of opposition fighters). They originate from 74 different countries – 70% from the Middle East and 18% from Western Europe, presumably children of Muslim immigrants. The largest number (over 2,000) came from neighboring Jordan, followed by Saudi Arabia (over 1,000), Tunisia (970), Lebanon (890) and Libya (556).

Based on the Afghanistan experience of the 1980s, the possible blowback effects once these battle-hardened and ideologically motivated fighters return home are considerable.

The porous Jordanian-Syrian border is one avenue of entry. Another is the Turkish-Syrian one. Turkish authorities have made no effort to interdict the transit of foreign fighters whose destination is obviously the battlefield.

Saudi Arabia, not surprisingly, is also involved. According to journalist Jamie Dettmer, the Saudis are turning a blind eye to jihadists leaving from Riyadh airport for northern Syria (via Turkey). Exporting their own jihadists serves as a safety valve of sorts for the regime as well as legitimizing itself at home, among conservative elements, by promoting “pure Islam” against the Shi’ite heresy.

It also confirms that the battle for Syria is deemed crucial by the Saudis in terms of checking Iran’s hegemonic ambitions, and the al-Saud regime’s survival. ■

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WISSAM AL-OKILI/REUTERS

A car bomb attack against Shi’ite mosques in Baghdad