

# AL-QAIDA'S UNCERTAIN FUTURE

The political upheaval sweeping North Africa and the Middle East and the recent death of Osama bin Laden have weakened al-Qaida. But the terrorist organisation has a record of turning crises into opportunities. Depending on how the Arab Spring unfolds, al-Qaida's regional affiliates and allies may gain ground by focusing their energies on consolidating local gains. And despite the loss of bin Laden, al-Qaida's ideology will continue to resonate with Western aspirants. Importantly, how the West responds to these developments will help determine how well al-Qaida adapts to its new environment.



REUTERS/STR New

Rebel poses with grenades captured from forces loyal to Libyan leader Gaddafi, 10 June 2011

Over the past decade, al-Qaida has suffered some crippling defeats. Its primary base of operation in Afghanistan was eliminated; it was largely chased out of its sanctuary in Iraq; much of its top leadership has been killed or captured; its finances have been greatly diminished; and its members are hounded daily by drone and aerial attacks. Under immense international pressure, al-Qaida has had much less opportunity to coordinate spectacular attacks targeting the West.

And yet, in spite of these setbacks, the organisation has proven particularly resilient. It has regrouped in Pakistan; spawned branches and franchises in Yemen and North Africa; formed alliances with radical groups in Somalia, Lebanon, and Pakistan; and has inspired Westerners to conduct autonomous attacks in their home countries. Accordingly, while global counterterrorism successes have diminished its capa-

bilities, al-Qaida has recouped some of its losses.

Today, al-Qaida faces renewed uncertainty. First, the Arab Spring rolling through the Middle East and North Africa has defied the political status quo, virtually transforming al-Qaida's strategic backyard. Widespread popular protests and dissident movements have toppled two dictatorial regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, have significantly undermined three more in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, and have shaken a half-dozen other governments to the core. Second, in May 2011, US Special Operations forces killed Osama bin Laden in a daring covert operation in Abbottabad, Pakistan. After a decade-long international manhunt, the US finally followed through with its promise to eliminate the al-Qaida leader.

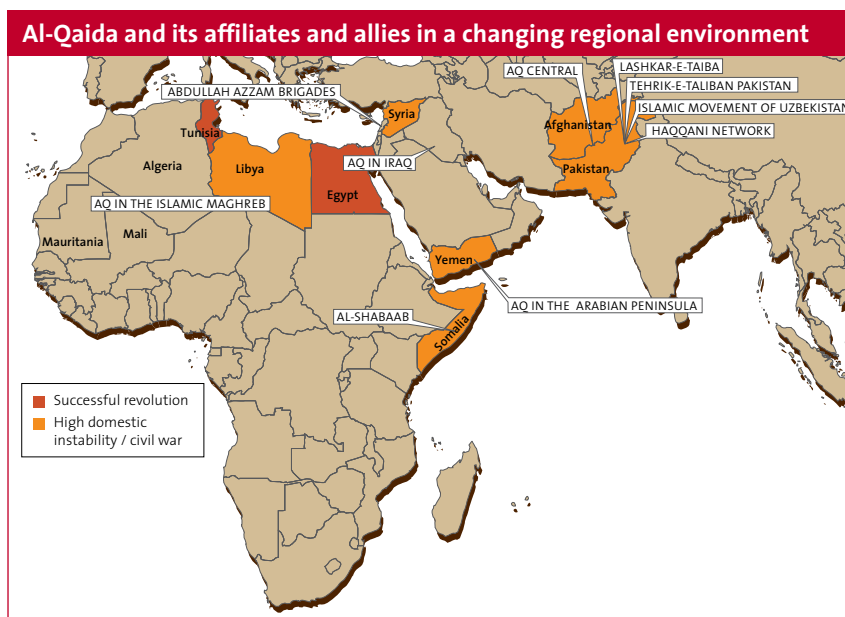
It is widely assumed that these two developments will further weaken al-Qaida.

This may well be the case. But there are also indications that al-Qaida may benefit from the Arab Spring. Its ideology will no doubt survive bin Laden. Al-Qaida's regional affiliates may focus more on local rather than global activities in coming years, but homegrown terrorism will remain a concern for security officials in Europe and North America. In sum, Islamist terrorism will continue to be a complex and multifaceted challenge for the West.

## Al-Qaida and the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring began in January 2011, when long-simmering political, social, and economic discontent boiled over. Individual acts of desperation – including several self-immolations – sparked large-scale street protests, which in turn gave birth to pro-democracy dissident movements. Some regimes collapsed, while others have resorted to intimidation, imprisonment, and deadly force in hopes of regaining control. While the Arab Spring is still unfolding, one thing is certain: Al-Qaida took notice. In a statement purportedly issued by bin Laden (though released two weeks after his death), he “congratulates” the dissident movements on “their historic victories”. And Ayman al-Zawahri, who recently replaced bin Laden as al-Qaida's leader, promised the dissidents that “your jihadi brethren [i.e., al-Qaida] are confronting alongside you the same enemy.” All of this was a blatant and poorly constructed attempt by al-Qaida to equate the Arab Spring with its own violent struggle against the region's regimes.

Despite its attempt to hijack the narrative of the Arab Spring, there are good reasons to assume that al-Qaida has been wounded by recent developments. First, the fact that



over al-Qaida operations after the attacks in the US on 11 September 2001, reports following the Abbottabad raid suggest that even in hiding, he continued to plan and direct acts of terrorism. If so, al-Qaida will grieve the loss of his operational and tactical leadership. Finally, the fact that the US dedicated such an impressive amount of time, effort, and money to locating and killing bin Laden sends a strong deterrent message to others that the US has the patience, resolve, and resources to make good on its threats. Targeted eliminations, like that of bin Laden, can force surviving terrorist leaders deeper underground, demoralise terrorist foot soldiers, and prompt power vacuums, in-fighting, and struggles over succession.

And yet, it would be a mistake to oversell bin Laden’s importance. Al-Qaida completed its decentralisation and transformation into a global movement years ago. In its statement confirming his death, al-Qaida reminds us that “Sheikh Osama did not build this organization to die with his death.” Al-Qaida’s franchises and allies in Iraq, Yemen, North Africa, and Somalia are independent, autonomous, and self-perpetuating. While these groups pledged allegiance to bin Laden, he had little control over their operations. His death robs them of an inspiring figure, but does not hamper their ability to plan future acts of terrorism. Likewise, bin Laden’s message and al-Qaida’s ideology will be distributed by other prominent leaders, like al-Zawahri, Abu Yahya al-Libi, Nasser al-Wuhayshi, and Anwar al-Awlaqi, who have collectively issued more communiqués in recent years than bin Laden had. Al-Qaida will lament bin Laden’s loss, but it will survive.

### Al-Qaida’s global partners

Al-Zawahri as al-Qaida’s new leader will do his utmost to gain the loyalty of al-Qaida’s partners and ensure they continue to support al-Qaida’s international struggle. But al-Qaida’s core leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan is either pinned down or on the run. Couple that with new opportunities for growth in the Middle East and North Africa, and it appears that al-Qaida may become ever more decentralised in coming years. If so, its regional branches will play a more important role, and shifting regional dynamics will give them even greater leeway.

In the immediate, short-term period, the focus of these branches will be on shoring up local support, consolidating regional

the protest movements rose up independently of al-Qaida illustrates the organisation’s weakness. Al-Qaida was nowhere to be seen as the protests began, stayed on the sidelines as the movements gained momentum, and has been slow to catch up. Second, these movements, led by a handful of technologically-savvy youths, have had more success in challenging the Arab status quo in three months of non-violent protest than al-Qaida has had in several decades of bloody insurgency. The achievements of the Arab Spring are an embarrassment to al-Qaida, whose entire script dictates that bloodshed is the only way forward. And third, the fact that the protest movements have been popular, secular, and non-violent suggests, once again, that al-Qaida’s ideology and *modus operandi* fail to resonate with Arabs and Muslims. The Arab Spring represents an alternative model for achieving political change – one that has appeal, does not alienate supporters, and has proven successful at least twice. Al-Qaida’s strategic challenge is to demonstrate why it remains relevant at all.

However, convincing though such arguments were at the beginning of the Arab Spring, evidence is now emerging to suggest that recent developments in the Arab world may help rather than hurt al-Qaida in the long run. First, al-Qaida’s prospects have looked bleak before, but the organisation has repeatedly survived periods of crisis. Tomorrow may be no different. Second, the political chaos unleashed in the region gives jihadists an opportunity to regroup, recruit, and rearm. As governments teeter and fall, borders become porous, easing

the movement of weapons and militants between and within countries. And as security forces fire on protesters rather than on militants, al-Qaida will gain some much-needed breathing room. Third, undefended weapons stockpiles have been raided, putting sophisticated weapons – like shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles – within al-Qaida’s reach. And prisons in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and most worrisome, in Yemen have been emptied, putting suspected terrorists back on the street and, potentially, into al-Qaida’s waiting arms. Finally – and perhaps most critically – if the Arab Spring is unable to address the grievances that mobilised people to take to the street in the first place, al-Qaida’s ideology will be given a second chance. If democracy fails, if chaos and crime become the norm, if economies falter, or if religious, tribal, or sectarian divisions erupt, al-Qaida wins. The greater the optimism among post-revolution Arab populations, the greater the risk of disillusionment and resentment in the event that political change fails to occur.

### Al-Qaida after bin Laden

A similar assessment can be made with regard to bin Laden’s elimination. First, there is no doubt that his death has stung al-Qaida. Bin Laden was not just another ordinary al-Qaida commander; rather, he established and led the organisation for 23 years, laid out its strategic goals, acquired religious approval for its tactics, oversaw its expansion, and personally orchestrated many of its most devastating attacks. Few al-Qaida leaders can match his credentials, persona, and charisma. Second, though experts debate the degree of control bin Laden had

gains, attracting recruits, acquiring new weapons, and carving out a niche from within the emerging political landscape. Al-Qaida of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), for instance, is especially well placed to take advantage of the mayhem in North Africa. It will rearm itself and may attempt to expand its influence into Libya while making inroads with other local militant groups.

In the medium term, al-Qaida's partners may increasingly focus their attention on regional struggles. While they have all purposefully tied themselves to al-Qaida's war with the "far enemy" (the US and Europe), local concerns may grow in importance. With bin Laden gone, a regionalisation might take place, with al-Qaida's allies focusing on their regional objectives rather than on al-Qaida's global aspirations. For instance, al-Shabaab, al-Qaida's Somali ally, is involved in an ongoing struggle with local and African security forces. While it did honour its February 2010 allegiance to al-Qaida by launching attacks outside of Somalia – notably the devastating July 2010 suicide bombings in Kampala, Uganda – it may shift its energy towards strengthening its position at home. If so, it will place greater emphasis on conducting local attacks against the "near enemy" than on orchestrating international attacks.

In the long term, uncertainty will prevail. How much ground al-Qaida actually loses will depend on how the Arab Spring unfolds. But with al-Qaida's core leadership under enormous pressure, al-Qaida's periphery may step in and fill the void. Already, al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has conducted a number of daring attacks against the West, including Umar Abdulmutallab's 2009 airline bombing attempt and the 2010 "cargo plane plot". With Yemen on the brink of collapse, AQAP may have an opportunity to expand its international efforts. The US government has taken the threat seriously, confirming that the CIA is preparing vastly to expand its drone warfare capability in the region.

### Al-Qaida's Western aspirants

For Western security officials, homegrown radicalisation and homegrown terrorism are critical concerns. A preponderance of Islamist terrorism planned and carried out in the West over the past decade has involved Westerners inspired by militant ideologies. Many of these plots – including the 2004 Madrid bombings, both 2005 London bombings, the 2006 "liquid-bomb" plot, the 2006 Toronto plot, the 2007 Glasgow Airport

### Ayman al-Zawahri: Al-Qaida's new leader

- / Born in Egypt in 1951, Zawahri joined the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood in the 1960s and went on to found, and eventually lead, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, a violent extremist group.
- / According to Zawahri's jihadist ideology, secular Arab regimes are legitimate targets of terrorism because they fail to govern according to strict religious tenets.
- / Following the 1981 assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, Zawahri spent three years in prison, where he was reportedly tortured. Upon his release, he traveled to Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Sudan, and Afghanistan, where he met other radicals, including Osama bin Laden.
- / In 1998, Zawahri signed a fatwa (religious decree) with bin Laden calling for attacks on the West. He was later indicted for the 1998 US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania.
- / In June 2001, Zawahri's organization formally joined bin Laden's, and he became al-Qaida's second in command.
- / In June 2011, Zawahri officially replaced bin Laden as al-Qaida's leader.



attack and foiled London car bombing, the 2007 plot in Sauerland, Germany, the 2010 Times Square bombing, the 2010 Stockholm attack, and the 2010 and 2011 Hamburg and Dusseldorf cells – have been partially, and oftentimes entirely, orchestrated by Westerners. In each case, radicalised citizens have sought to kill fellow nationals. At times, homegrown terrorists inspired by al-Qaida have planned their attacks autonomously. Other times, Western radicals have acquired training and direction from al-Qaida, the Taliban, Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Muhammad, al-Shabaab, and others.

How the Arab Spring and bin Laden's death will affect trends in Islamist radicalisation and recruitment in the West is difficult to assess. It is possible, for instance, that Western radicals will seek to avenge bin Laden's death. Al-Qaida, the Taliban, al-Shabaab, and various other groups have all explicitly stated that they will seek retribution. Westerners may join these efforts. Otherwise, al-Qaida and its partners will continue to Westernise their propaganda, notwithstanding bin Laden's removal. AQAP, for instance, began publishing a glossy, English-language online journal called *Inspire* in July 2010. It advocates "open-source jihad" and "do-it-yourself terrorism". Al-Shabaab has also targeted Somalia's diaspora community with English-language propaganda, while Pakistani groups have done the same with German-language material. The goal, in each case, is to attract Western recruits. These efforts have proven successful and will continue.

As for the Arab Spring, it is possible that Westerners susceptible to radical ideologies will be placated by promises of political

change and swayed by the success of the non-violent movements. But plenty of political, social, and religious grievances remain, both in the Middle East and in the West, that have and can still be used to galvanise radicals. In the long term, it is also possible that migrants fleeing North Africa and settling in Europe will encounter strong anti-immigrant, xenophobic, and anti-Muslim sentiments that will aggravate grievances all around. Violence is a possible result.

### Containing al-Qaida

How well al-Qaida evolves in the coming years will partly depend on how the West responds to shifting regional dynamics. For starters, the US, Europe, and their friends and allies should help consolidate the changes sweeping the Arab world. Doing so would be in their best interest and would simultaneously ensure that al-Qaida cannot easily recuperate. At issue is the management of expectations. If the emerging Arab governments cannot bring about improvements for the uprising's popular base, anger and resentment will follow. The West should, where feasible, support democracy movements in the region with technical assistance, expertise, and advice. The West should also help liberalise and modernise Arab economies. Democracy will falter without fiscal, economic, managerial, and monetary improvements. Financial assistance and loans, along with trade and investment opportunities – already pledged by the G8 – should be offered in support of the Arab Spring. Importantly, promises of "partnerships" must be met.

In terms of countering al-Qaida, the West would be wise to keep up the pressure. Continued effort should go into locating and capturing or killing its leaders. That AQAP's

al-Awlaqi apparently dodged a US drone attack in Yemen only days after the bin Laden raid, and that al-Qaida affiliate Fazul Abdullah Mohammed was recently killed by vigilant security officers in Somalia, signals a general intent to continue harassing the organisation. This makes strategic sense; keeping al-Qaida's leaders on the run will help sap the organisation's strength.

Similarly, NATO and its allies must not conflate bin Laden's death with victory in Afghanistan. Departing Afghanistan (or for that matter, Iraq) prematurely, or leaving too few soldiers on the ground to consolidate gains, risks giving al-Qaida room to manoeuvre. Any exit strategy must ensure that local police and military forces are able – and willing – to fill the security void departing Western forces will leave. NATO must also avoid giving al-Qaida an opportunity to spin the Libyan conflict into a propaganda victory. Accidentally killing civilians, for instance, as NATO has done, may be a sad and unavoidable outcome of war, but it also allows militants to frame the West as an “occupier”. Ending the Libyan conflict quickly and decisively will stall al-Qaida's momentum. Finally, the West should further delegitimise al-Qaida among potential supporters in the West and abroad. A vast majority of Muslims have already rejected al-Qaida's virulent ideology and have been put off by its use of excessive and brutal violence. Reinforcing that rejection will further tarnish al-Qaida's reputation and diminish its global and regional importance.

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