

# BACKGROUND

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## The Arab Spring Descends into Islamist Winter: Implications for U.S. Policy

*James Phillips*

### Abstract

*In 2011 and 2012, a wave of popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East shook the region's autocratic regimes, prompting euphoric reactions in the West about an "Arab Spring" and a supposed new age of democracy. While the overthrow of authoritarian regimes can give democracy a chance to bloom, it has also created opportunities for a wide spectrum of Islamist parties to advance their undemocratic agendas. Islamist insurgents and terrorist organizations also are well positioned to expand their influence amid the political instability that has emerged in many countries. The Middle East has become an even more hostile strategic environment in which regional security, U.S. national interests, and Western values are increasingly under attack. The United States cannot afford to react with indifference.*

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Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison  
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

**The Heritage Foundation**  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002  
(202) 546-4400 | [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

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The wave of popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East that shook the region's autocratic regimes in 2011 and 2012 gave rise to an unjustified euphoria in many Western media outlets and governments about an "Arab Spring"—a misnomer motivated by wishful thinking. Just under two years later, the picture is not so rosy.

While the overthrow of authoritarian regimes can give democracy a chance to bloom, in many countries it has also created opportunities for a wide spectrum of Islamist parties to exploit elections to advance their undemocratic agendas. Islamist insurgents and terrorist organizations also are well positioned to expand their influence amid the political instability that has emerged in many countries. After nearly two years of unrest, the Middle East has become an even more volatile and hostile strategic environment in which regional security, U.S. national interests, and Western values are increasingly under attack.

America is not the world's policeman and it cannot determine how the peoples of the Middle East live their lives or govern themselves. Washington can, however, do a much more effective job of protecting U.S. national interests and promoting

### KEY POINTS

- The countries caught up in the uprisings of the "Arab Spring" face a much more difficult and protracted transition to democracy than is generally assumed. Al-Qaeda and other Islamist extremist groups that were sidelined in the initial phases of the uprisings have exploited sectarian tensions, power vacuums, and civil wars to expand their power.
- The United States should establish clear red lines for new Arab governments that detail the requirements for continued U.S. support: cooperation in fighting terrorists, respect for the freedom and human rights of their own citizens, and the fulfillment of international legal commitments.
- The U.S. should also promote economic freedom, which is an important building block for political freedom in Arab countries. It must also identify potential sub-state allies that are threatened by Islamist extremism and cooperate with them to contain and defeat al-Qaeda and other terror groups.

peace and prosperity in an important part of the world.

The United States needs a comprehensive strategy to combat Islamist regimes that promote agendas counter to American interests and that suppress opportunities for political, religious, and economic freedom. This strategy must be global in scope, but be crafted to fit different situations in specific regions and countries. Further, a U.S. strategy to counter hostile Islamist political groups must work in concert with a second strategy to combat the rising global Islamist insurgency and associated acts of transnational terrorism. As top priority, the focus of both strategies must be on the Middle East and North Africa—the center of the “Arab Spring.” Meanwhile, there are some critical first steps the U.S. can take now to hold fledgling governments accountable, promote economic freedom, and diminish the threat of transnational terrorism.

### Defining the Dangers

The popular rebellions that erupted in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and, to a lesser extent, in other Arab countries during the so-called Arab Spring are works in progress that, so far, have yielded a variety of outcomes. In many cases, the broad ad hoc coalitions that ousted authoritarian regimes dissolved in acrimony, power struggles, and ideological clashes that continue to undermine stability in the region. Islamists seeking to impose harsh interpretations of Sharia law, which restricts freedoms, particularly of religious minorities and women, have emerged as leading contenders for power.

Islamists pose an ideological threat to Western values, though not necessarily an immediate security threat to the United States, unless they support terrorism or violent revolution. Anti-American terrorism is often an outgrowth of Islamist totalitarian movements, such as al-Qaeda, which use terrorism as a tool to advance revolutionary goals such as the imposition of a harsh and intolerant brand of Sharia, the creation of a totalitarian Islamist state, and the eventual global caliphate. Al-Qaeda is much more than a terrorist group—it sees itself as the vanguard of a global Islamist totalitarian revolution. To this end, it seeks to exploit local and regional conflicts to advance its vision of a global Islamist insurgency.

Al-Qaeda and other Islamist totalitarians not only pose an immediate threat to the United States but also to a wide spectrum of Muslims and non-Muslims in the region who could be potential allies of the United States. Al-Qaeda cloaks its totalitarian goals in Islamic religious symbols and claims to be defending Islam, but it has killed more Muslims than non-Muslims and more Arabs than Americans. To defeat the terrorist threat posed by al-Qaeda, the United States must recognize the appeal of the group’s revolutionary ideology and expose it as a threat to the lives and freedoms of Muslims.

To prevent al-Qaeda and other Islamist totalitarian groups from exploiting the turbulence of the Arab Spring to advance their radical agenda, the United States should seek allies in Arab governments, secular groups, tribal leaders, and

other groups threatened by Islamist totalitarians. It should also engage Muslim religious groups and political parties if they reject violence and unequivocally support democratic principles.<sup>1</sup>

### Impact on U.S. Security Interests

The “Arab Spring” that began in 2011 has ushered in an unprecedented political transformation that has devolved in varying degrees into a chaotic “Islamist Winter” in many Arab countries that increasingly threatens U.S. national interests. Washington lost a key strategic partner when Egypt’s Mubarak regime was replaced by one dominated by the anti-Western Muslim Brotherhood. Other regional allies in Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen now face mounting challenges posed by Islamist-dominated political opposition movements.

Where elections have been held, anti-Western Islamist political parties of various stripes, that are ideologically predisposed to oppose U.S. foreign policy goals, have generally been the chief beneficiaries. Although they cloak their radical agendas in lip service to democratic ideals, their ultimate goal is to subvert genuine democracy by exploiting elections as a means to vault to power and impose Sharia law.<sup>2</sup>

The Muslim Brotherhood’s euphemistically named Freedom and Justice Party won Egypt’s elections and the Ennahda (Renaissance) party was boosted to power in Tunisia’s elections. Although Islamists did not do as well in Libya’s

1. Lisa Curtis, “Championing Liberty Abroad to Counter Islamist Extremism,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2518, February 9, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/02/championing-liberty-abroad-to-counter-islamist-extremism>.

2. Raymond Ibrahim, “Voting in Egypt as ‘Holy War,’” Gatestone Institute, May 22, 2012, <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3071/voting-in-egypt> (accessed December 14, 2012).

elections, they are exploiting the continued chaos, factional infighting, ethnic tensions, and tribal frictions that Libya's fledgling government appears unable to resolve. Chronic political turbulence in Libya eventually may allow Islamists to hijack the revolution, as they have done elsewhere.

In addition to removing or weakening regimes aligned with the United States, the Arab uprisings have empowered Islamist extremists who did not play a large role during the initial phases of the uprisings. It has weakened security cooperation between the affected Arab governments and the U.S. and strengthened Islamist terrorist groups, particularly in Egypt, Libya, Mali, Syria, and Yemen. Al-Qaeda and other Islamist revolutionary groups who were sidelined in the early phases of peaceful protest campaigns are now well positioned to expand their power, sometimes at the expense of Islamist political parties and sometimes in complicity with them.

The erosion of state authority has severely undermined border controls in many regions, allowing Islamic militant groups to move men, arms, and money across increasingly porous borders in failed or failing states. Libyan arms seized from the Qadhafi regime's huge stockpiles have bolstered Islamist insurgents and terrorists in Algeria, Egypt, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, and Tunisia. Some have turned up in Gaza in the hands of Hamas and other Islamist extremists fighting Israel.

The rising tide of Islamism has also increased the likelihood of another Arab-Israeli war. It has emboldened Hamas and other

Palestinian Islamist militants, who seek to pull an increasingly supportive Egypt into the conflict to tilt the balance of power against Israel. The peace treaties that Israel signed with Egypt and Jordan, two of the chief American diplomatic achievements that have bolstered regional stability in recent decades, could soon unravel as the region is roiled by intensifying Arab-Israeli tensions.

### **Unfinished Revolutions: Uncertain Outcomes**

The outcome of the Arab uprisings is likely to be different in each country, depending on the strength of the contending political forces, the willingness of ruling regimes to accommodate popular demands for change, the capacity of regimes to resist change, and the balance of power between rival political factions that seek to fill the political vacuums created by sudden political upheavals. The countries burdened with the worst dictatorships—Libya, Syria, and Yemen—long have suffered from ravaged civil societies, and have been wracked by bitter civil wars that will make successful transitions to stable democracies exceedingly difficult.

Moreover, no revolution in the Middle East has advanced democracy and stability in the host country since Turkey's secular revolution in the 1920s. Islamists that have come to power in recent decades in Afghanistan, Gaza, Iran, and Sudan have sacrificed the freedom and welfare of their own people in pursuit of radical agendas that include exporting their revolutions, external aggression, and internal repression.

The bottom line is that the initial democratic impetus that infused

many of the disparate groups that launched the Arab uprisings is not likely to last through the course of the unpredictable political revolutions that have been set in motion. When the revolutions start eating their children, idealistic democrats, liberals, and secularists are likely to be swallowed up by better organized, better funded, highly motivated Islamist movements or by military leaders who seek to restore order in societies wracked by political infighting.

**Ideological Challenges.** Islamist political parties, even so-called moderates that have come to power in elections, will inevitably blame the U.S. and the West for the problems of their own countries. Once in power, they will be ill equipped to solve the urgent economic and social problems faced by their own societies, and naturally will scapegoat the U.S. to escape blame for deteriorating economic and social conditions. As Husain Haqqani, co-editor of the Hudson Institute's *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, has noted:

The ideology of Islamist revivalism, rooted in a culture of grievance and victimhood, remains powerful. Newly elected Islamist governments in some Arab countries, such as Egypt, will most likely fuel hatred of the West as substitute for economic and social progress, just as Iran has done since the 1979 revolution. This, in turn, will continue to produce a steady flow of terrorists ready to kill Americans.<sup>3</sup>

Tunisia probably has the best chance of becoming a stable democracy, given its relatively large middle

3. Husain Haqqani, "Why the U.S. Needs Muslim Allies," *The Washington Post*, November 1, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-us-needs-muslim-allies/2012/11/01/9a852950-22dd-11e2-8448-81b1ce7d6978\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-us-needs-muslim-allies/2012/11/01/9a852950-22dd-11e2-8448-81b1ce7d6978_story.html) (accessed December 14, 2012).

class, well-educated population, and relatively secular political culture. But even there, there are disturbing trends, including an increasingly strident Salafi movement and crude efforts to indoctrinate the next generation to support al-Qaeda and other Islamist extremist movements. The Middle East Media Research Institute discovered a chilling video in which Islamist extremists teach young children to sing a song in support of al-Qaeda:

Our leader Bin Laden is  
America's worst nightmare,

with the power of faith and our  
weapon, the PK machine-gun.

If they call me a terrorist, I will  
consider it an honor.

Our terror is blessed, a divine  
call.

We destroyed America with a  
civilian airplane—

the World Trade Center was  
turned into rubble.<sup>4</sup>

The traditional monarchies of the Arab world have so far escaped the worst excesses of the Arab uprisings. The Arab kings were generally perceived to have more political legitimacy than many of the leaders of politically bankrupt false republics. Several kingdoms were insulated from protests by virtue of their religious credentials: The kings of Jordan and Morocco claim to be descendants of the prophet Mohammed, and the Saudi royal family benefited from

their close ties to the Wahhabi religious establishment and status as custodians of the holy city of Mecca. Saudi Arabia has also used its oil wealth to co-opt many of its citizens who seek greater political power.

But this relative calm may not last much longer, particularly in Jordan, where King Abdullah has been undermined by spillover from Syria's increasingly bloody civil war and by adverse economic trends, some of which were exacerbated by the repeated sabotage of oil pipelines from Egypt by Islamist terrorists operating in the Sinai. But the crucial theater for the future evolution of the Arab uprisings is likely to be Egypt.

### **Egypt: A Bellwether**

Egypt, the most populous Arab state, is a key player in Arab politics, culture, and ideology. The popular uprising against the Mubarak regime did not trigger an immediate revolution, instead prompting a February 2011 military coup that left the ruling military elite in an uncomfortable triangular relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood and the liberal reformers that had played a leading role in the opening phase of the revolt. But, given the relatively tiny size of Egypt's middle-class and Westernized elites, it was clear from the beginning that the Facebook and Twitter appeals that so impressed Western media would not carry the same weight with the bulk of the Egyptian electorate.<sup>5</sup> Many Egyptians voted as they were told by the leaders of local mosques by selecting pictograms on the ballots (approximately 30 percent of Egyptians are illiterate).

The Muslim Brotherhood eventually consolidated its political dominance by outmaneuvering Egypt's military establishment, which had acted as a brake on its power after it finished first in Egypt's 2011 parliamentary elections. President Mohamed Morsi reversed the military coup with a counter coup by exploiting an August 2012 attack by Islamist militants in the Sinai, which killed 16 Egyptian soldiers, to purge the army's top ranks and establish his unfettered political primacy.

President Morsi, a longtime member of the Muslim Brotherhood, has set Egypt on a troubling new foreign policy course since coming to power in June. His government has distanced itself from Washington, while bolstering ties to China and improving relations with Iran. Morsi's first trip outside the Middle East was to China. He embraced Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at an Islamic summit in Saudi Arabia and became the first Egyptian leader to visit Iran since the 1979 revolution when he traveled to Tehran for the August 2012 Non-Aligned Movement summit.

Morsi has also radically altered Egypt's relations with Hamas, the Palestinian offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was regarded with hostility and suspicion by the previous regime. He invited Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh to Cairo and eased border restrictions between Gaza and Egypt. Cairo has also aggressively inserted itself in the recent Gaza crisis. After Israel's retaliation for multiple days of rocket attacks from Gaza with air strikes that killed the leader of

4. Middle East Media Research Institute, "Tunisian Children Recite Al-Qaeda Song Extolling 9/11: 'Our Terror Is Blessed,'" October 10, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19UcTBHKvVU> (accessed December 14, 2012).

5. James Phillips, "Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Lurks as a Long-Term Threat to Freedom," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 3138, February 8, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/02/egypts-muslim-brotherhood-lurks-as-a-long-term-threat-to-freedom>.

Hamas's terrorist wing and targeted Palestinian rocket-launching, storage, and manufacturing sites, Morsi blasted Israel and withdrew Egypt's ambassador from Jerusalem. He also dispatched Prime Minister Hisham Kandil to Gaza to express Egyptian solidarity with Hamas. Egypt also brokered a cease-fire that halted the fighting on November 21. Morsi has exploited the Israel-Gaza crisis to boost his political position at home, weaken ties with Israel, and escalate Egypt's cooperation with Hamas.

Morsi's government has also undermined Egypt's 1979 peace treaty with Israel. After Islamist militants killed 16 Egyptian border guards in the Sinai on August 5, Cairo deployed tanks in close proximity to the Israeli border, a violation of the U.S.-brokered treaty.<sup>6</sup> Under the terms of that agreement, tanks are restricted to the western Sinai within 30 miles of the Suez Canal.

The violent September 11 protests and attacks on the U.S. embassy in Cairo have deepened American concerns about Egypt's new government. Despite advance warning about plans by ultra-radical Islamists to mount a protest demonstration on September 11, 2012, Egyptian security forces were suspiciously lax in restraining the crowd, which invaded the embassy grounds, tore down the American flag, and replaced it with a flag that resembled al-Qaeda's black banner.

President Morsi's nonchalant public reaction to the attack only compounded the problem. Instead of immediately denouncing the attack

and taking action to upgrade security around the embassy, as Libyan and Yemeni leaders have done after similar events, Morsi waited a day before issuing a mild rebuke to the rioters via Facebook. Morsi's ambivalent approach to fulfilling Egypt's legal obligation to protect foreign diplomats did little to reassure Washington or deter future riots at the embassy. Morsi belatedly promised to protect U.S. diplomats in a phone call with President Barack Obama and a statement issued in Brussels.

A previous terrorist attack in August 2011, which had also emanated from the Sinai, had prompted an Israeli military response that inadvertently killed five Egyptian soldiers, leading an Egyptian mob to attack the Israeli embassy in Cairo and force the evacuation of Israeli diplomats.

**Proliferating Islamist Extremism.** Egypt's elections not only brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power but also empowered the even more radical Salafists.<sup>7</sup> Their Nour Party, which finished second in the election to the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, played a leading role in the violent September 11 attack on the U.S. embassy.

Another Salafist political party, the Building and Development Party, consists of rehabilitated members of the Islamic Group, a revolutionary Islamist group that engaged in terrorism. This party seeks the release of its spiritual leader, Omar

Abdel-Rahman (also known as "the blind sheikh"), who is serving a life sentence in the United States for his role in the 1993 plot to bomb the World Trade Center and other targets in New York City. The fact that such a radical movement garnered 13 seats in Egypt's parliament has been described as "electoral Bin Ladenism."<sup>8</sup>

Ultra-radical Islamist extremists have flocked to Egypt's Sinai peninsula, which has become an increasingly lawless ungoverned space. Working with smuggling networks and radicalized Bedouins resentful of Egypt's central government, Islamist militants have carved out a staging area in remote mountains that they have used as a springboard for attacks on Israel, Egyptian security forces, tourists, and a pipeline carrying Egyptian natural gas to Israel and Jordan. Although these attacks have benefitted the Muslim Brotherhood by providing a humiliating pretext for purging Egypt's armed forces, in the long run, such attacks could threaten its interests by sparking a war between Egypt and Israel.

### Al-Qaeda's Resurgence

Al-Qaeda was caught off guard by the Arab uprisings, and played a negligible role in the initial phases of the revolts.<sup>9</sup> Its top leadership, whittled down in a war of attrition by arrests and drone strikes, lost some of its effectiveness because the leaders were forced to hunker down in the remote tribal badlands and cities of Pakistan and spend more time and

6. James Phillips, "U.S. Should Insist Egypt's Military Buildup Must Comply with Peace Treaty," Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 3707, August 22, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/08/us-should-insist-egypt-s-military-buildup-must-comply-with-peace-treaty>.

7. Salafists are fundamentalists who seek to emulate the lives of the earliest Muslims and to reform Muslim societies by adopting the social and political structures of the first Muslim communities.

8. David Ignatius, "How Bin Laden Is Winning," *The Washington Post*, April 29, 2012, p. A19.

9. Shiraz Maher and Peter Neumann, "Al-Qaeda at the Crossroads: How the Terror Group Is Responding to the Loss of its Leaders and the Arab Spring," The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence, August 2012.

effort in taking precautions to ensure their own security. Even before the May 2011 death of Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda had evolved from a centrally directed, hierarchical organization into a network of relatively independent franchises and affiliates.<sup>10</sup>

As popular uprisings swept the Arab Middle East and North Africa, the dominant narrative was that Islamist revolutionary groups, such as al-Qaeda, were irrelevant because their conviction that only a violent jihad could overthrow regimes was proven wrong. This may have been true where peaceful demonstrators were able to topple governments, but in countries where nonviolent demonstrations morphed into bloody civil wars, al-Qaeda has been handed renewed opportunities to attract followers, imitators, and allies.

Even in “Arab Spring” countries that have undergone relatively peaceful transitions, such as Tunisia and Egypt, al-Qaeda may exploit reservoirs of potential recruits from among young Arabs galvanized by the political upheavals and subsequently disenfranchised with the uneven and disappointing results of the uprisings. As terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman has noted, “Al-Qaeda’s core demographic has always been disenfranchised, disillusioned and marginalized youth,” and that pool is unlikely to dissipate anytime soon.<sup>11</sup>

Al-Qaeda is also poised to exploit failed or failing states in Libya, Mali, Syria, and Yemen. The fall of

autocratic Arab regimes and the subsequent factional infighting within the ad hoc coalitions that ousted those regimes has created power vacuums that have allowed al-Qaeda franchises in North Africa and Yemen to expand the territories that they control. Rising sectarian tensions in Syria also have presented al-Qaeda and other Sunni extremist groups with major opportunities to expand their activities.

Jonathan Evans, director general of the British security service MI5, has warned that “parts of the Arab world have once more become a permissive environment for al-Qaeda.”<sup>12</sup> In Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, the collapse or purge of intelligence and counterterrorism organizations has removed important constraints on the growth of al-Qaeda and similar Islamist terrorist groups. Many dangerous terrorists were released or escaped from prison. Al-Qaeda and other revolutionary groups were handed new opportunities to recruit, organize, attract funding for, train, and arm a new wave of followers, and to consolidate safe havens from which to mount future attacks.

This is a welcome development from al-Qaeda’s viewpoint, coming at a time when its sanctuaries in Pakistan have become increasingly threatened by U.S. drone strikes. Given al-Qaeda’s Arab roots, the Middle East and North Africa provide much-improved access to potential Arab recruits than the more

remote regions of the tribal badlands along the Afghanistan–Pakistan border, where many al-Qaeda cadres fled after the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001. The countries destabilized by the Arab uprisings also could provide easier access to al-Qaeda’s Europe-based cadres, who pose the most dangerous threats to the U.S. homeland by virtue of their European passports and greater ease of blending into Western societies.

Al-Qaeda’s regional franchises have made significant gains due to the Arab uprisings in several countries:

**Yemen.** The effects of the Arab uprisings clearly have benefitted Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) at the expense of the chronically weak government. The protracted crisis that eventually forced Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down in February 2012 diverted the attention and resources of Yemen army and security services. AQAP seized control of almost half the country before being driven back by an offensive by the new Yemeni government, augmented by escalating drone strikes conducted by the United States.

AQAP has presented the most potent threat to the U.S. homeland of all the al-Qaeda franchises.<sup>13</sup> It launched the “underwear bomber” plot which attempted to destroy a civilian airliner over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009, plotted to mail bombs concealed in printer

10. James Phillips, “The Evolving Al-Qaeda Threat,” Heritage Foundation *Lecture* No. 928, March 17, 2006, <http://www.heritage.org/research/lecture/the-evolving-al-qaeda-threat>.

11. Bruce Hoffman, “The Arab Spring and Its Influence on Al-Qaida,” Combating Terrorism Center *Sentinel*, May 22, 2012, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-arab-spring-and-its-influence-on-al-qaida> (accessed December 17, 2012).

12. MI5 Security Service, “Address at the Lord Mayor’s Annual Defense and Security Lecture by the Director General of the Security Service, Jonathan Evans,” London, June 25, 2012, <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/home/about-us/who-we-are/staff-and-management/director-general/speeches-by-the-director-general/the-olympics-and-beyond.html> (accessed December 18, 2012).

13. James Phillips, “What the President Must Do About Yemen,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 3204, March 24, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/03/what-the-president-must-do-about-yemen>.

cartridges to the United States using commercial air freight shippers in 2010, and made another attempt to bomb a civilian airliner with an improved version of an “underwear bomb” made without metal parts, which was revealed in May 2012.

**Libya.** Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), one of al-Qaeda’s weaker franchises before the Arab uprisings, has flourished in recent months and is now one of al-Qaeda’s best-financed and most heavily armed franchises. The 2011 overthrow of Libya’s Qaddafi regime pried open a Pandora’s box of problems that AQIM has exploited. Large quantities of arms, including shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles or man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS), were looted from Qadhafi’s huge arms depots. An estimated 800 MANPADS, which pose a lethal threat to commercial airliners, have fallen into the hands of foreign insurgent groups after being moved out of Libya.<sup>14</sup> Libyan MANPADS have turned up in the hands of AQIM, the Nigerian Boko Haram terrorist group, and Hamas in Gaza. At some point, one or more could be used in a terrorist attack against a civilian airliner.

The September 11, 2012, attack on the U.S. diplomatic mission in Benghazi underscored the extent to which Islamist extremists have grown stronger, particularly in

eastern Libya, a longtime bastion of Islamic fervor. The radical Islamist group that launched the attack, Ansar al-Sharia, has links to AQIM and shares its violent ideology. Ansar al-Sharia and scores of other Islamist militias have flourished in post-Qadhafi Libya because the weak central government has been unable to tame fractious militias, curb tribal clashes, or dampen rising tensions between Arabs and Berbers in the west and between Arabs and the African Toubou tribe in the south. As one Libyan lawyer put it: “We have a government that exists only on paper.”<sup>15</sup>

**Mali.** The fall of Qadhafi also led hundreds of heavily armed Tuareg mercenaries formerly employed by his regime to cross into Mali, where they spearheaded a Tuareg separatist insurgency against Mali’s weak central government. In November 2011, they formed the separatist National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and sought to carve out an independent state. In cooperation with AQIM and the Islamist movement Ansar Dine, they gained control over northern Mali, a territory as big as Texas, which is now the largest terrorist sanctuary in the world.<sup>16</sup> The success of AQIM and allied movements in Mali has helped to advance AQIM’s self-declared long-term goal of transforming the Sahel “into one vast, seething, chaotic Somalia.”<sup>17</sup>

**Syria.** Outside of Yemen, Syria provides perhaps the most promising theater for expanding al-Qaeda influence. The opposition to the Alawite-dominated Assad regime is predominantly Sunni, and al-Qaeda’s Sunni supremacist ideology is likely to resonate strongly in the increasingly sectarian civil war. Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which developed a logistical infrastructure in Syria to move men, arms, and money into Iraq during the peak fighting there, now has reversed the flow across Syria’s porous border. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper testified before Congress in 2012 that “we believe that Al-Qaeda in Iraq is extending its reach into Syria.”<sup>18</sup>

**Iraq.** Although AQI had been severely degraded by U.S. and Iraqi security forces in an intensive counter-terrorism campaign from 2006 to 2011, the resilient terrorist organization has revived and thrived after the withdrawal of U.S. troops in December 2011. AQI has exploited renewed sectarian tensions between the predominantly Shia Iraqi government and Iraq’s disgruntled Sunni minority to stage a bloody comeback. U.S. and Iraqi officials estimate that AQI has more than doubled in numbers from a year ago to about 2,500 fighters and is launching about 140 attacks a week in Iraq.<sup>19</sup> AQI’s leadership has grown cocky enough

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14. David Ignatius, “Libyan Missiles on the Loose,” *The Washington Post*, May 8, 2012, [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-05-08/opinions/35455309\\_1\\_cia-officer-sa-7s-sa-24s](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-05-08/opinions/35455309_1_cia-officer-sa-7s-sa-24s) (accessed December 17, 2012).
  15. David D. Kirkpatrick, “Libya Struggles to Curb Militias, the Only Police,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/14/world/africa/libyan-government-struggles-to-rein-in-powerful-militias.html?pagewanted=all&r=0> (accessed December 17, 2012).
  16. Yahia Zoubir, “Qaddafi’s Spawn: What the Dictator’s Demise Unleashed in the Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 24, 2012, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137796/yahia-h-zoubir/qaddafis-spawn> (accessed December 17, 2012).
  17. William Maclean, “Local Wars Blur al-Qaeda’s Threat to West,” Reuters, July 5, 2012.
  18. Jonathan Landay, “Top US Official: Al-Qaeda in Iraq Joining Fight Against Syria’s Assad,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 17, 2012, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2012/0217/Top-US-official-Al-Qaeda-in-Iraq-joining-fight-against-Syria-s-Assad> (accessed December 17, 2012).
  19. “Al-Qaeda in Iraq Is Rebuilding, Officials Say,” CBS News, October 9, 2012, [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202\\_162-57529084/al-qaeda-in-iraq-is-rebuilding-officials-say/](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202_162-57529084/al-qaeda-in-iraq-is-rebuilding-officials-say/) (accessed December 17, 2012).

to threaten attacks “in the heart” of America.<sup>20</sup> Matthew Olsen, director of the National Counterterrorism Center, assessed that this threat must be taken seriously, given the arrests of several associates of the terrorist group in the United States and Canada in recent years.<sup>21</sup>

## The Arab Uprisings and U.S. Policy

The ultimate results of the Arab uprisings will differ in each country. Washington cannot craft a one-size-fits-all policy, but must tailor its policies to fit local conditions in individual countries. Washington must have a proactive strategy to counter Islamist extremism, combat terrorist groups, and offer effective measures to promote solutions for problems that contributed to the uprisings. In particular, the U.S. must offer solutions to address the single greatest challenge in the region—poor prospects for economic growth and job creation—the cause célèbre that was the root of much of the original impetus for the Arab uprisings. The problem right now is that the Obama Administration is woefully short on providing the right solutions.

The Obama Administration has been too quick to bestow democratic legitimacy on Islamist movements that hold non-democratic ideological agendas. The Carter Administration, which made a similar mistake in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian revolution, was rewarded by Iranian revolutionaries with the hostage crisis. Islamist extremists who claimed to be democrats, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, have also advanced radical agendas with

disastrous results after gaining power through elections.

The Obama Administration must not repeat that mistake in Egypt with the Muslim Brotherhood, which cloaks its radical long-term goals with moderate rhetoric. While the Muslim Brotherhood is willing to participate in elections to gain power, it is not clear that it would accede to the results of an election if it loses power. At the heart of its ideology lies an anti-democratic idea: that its politicized interpretation of the will of God trumps the will of the people.

Elections are a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for building a stable democracy. Equally important are the presence of a supportive civil society, respect for the rule of law, independent institutions, freedom of the press, political freedom, and religious freedom. These conditions are not present in many of the countries affected by the Arab uprisings, and the transition to democracy is likely to be much more difficult and take far longer than many assume in the West.

In the meantime, Washington should not confuse democracy with freedom. There have been many revolutions that claimed to be democratic and led to more repression rather than freedom, including the French, Russian, and Iranian revolutions. The United States should focus on promoting freedom rather than democracy. Not only is a political party’s commitment to freedom easier to judge, both before and after it has taken power, but the drive for freedom was the original impetus for the Arab uprisings. Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian street vendor

who set himself on fire to protest the seizure of his merchandise and lack of economic freedom, was the initial inspiration for widespread protests.

**First Steps.** The United States needs a comprehensive integrated strategy to deal with a truly strategic challenge. At the same time, events are moving too quickly for the U.S. to wait to act. To shape the new order emerging from the Arab uprisings, Washington should:

**Establish clear red lines for new governments that spell out the criteria for continued U.S. support.** Anti-American hostility is deeply embedded in the DNA of Islamist political parties. When they come to power, the U.S. should only provide support if the regimes:

- **Oppose terrorism.** In particular, their willingness to cooperate against al-Qaeda is a vital litmus test.
- **Respect the freedom and human rights of their own citizens.** Islamists, left to their own devices, seek to impose harsh Sharia law that treats women and religious minorities as second-class citizens.
- **Fulfill international legal commitments.** In particular, Egypt must adhere to its peace treaty with Israel, which is an important building block for stability in the region.

**Change U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy.** A U.S. strategy myopically focused on attrition of the leadership of al-Qaeda and

20. James Phillips, “A Resurgent Al-Qaeda in Iraq Threatens U.S. Attack,” The Heritage Foundation, The Foundry, July 26, 2012, <http://blog.heritage.org/2012/07/26/a-resurgent-al-qaeda-in-iraq-threatens-u-s-attack/>.

21. Matthew G. Olsen, “Understanding the Homeland Threat Landscape,” testimony before the Homeland Security Committee, U.S. House of Representatives, July 25, 2012, <http://homeland.house.gov/sites/homeland.house.gov/files/Testimony-Olsen.pdf> (accessed December 18, 2012).



affiliated organizations will not work.<sup>22</sup> Al-Qaeda has evolved from a tight-knit terrorist organization into a networked transnational movement dispersed in many countries. It likely will continue to become even more decentralized, given the death of bin Laden. Strong international counterterrorism cooperation is necessary to reverse its growth, mitigate the threat it poses, and eventually defeat it.

Washington must place a higher priority on establishing relationships with military and intelligence officials within newly established governments, who could emerge as de facto allies against Islamist extremists. It should also offer to train, equip, and provide advisers for nascent military, intelligence, and internal security services. This would not only help in cultivating possible allies against al-Qaeda and other Islamist extremists but also would help prevent the security organs of new governments from sliding back into old habits of behavior that threaten the freedom and lives of their compatriots.

#### **Promote Economic Freedom.**

Political demands were central to the Arab uprisings, but economic reform is critical for shoring up political stability and facilitating sustainable political reforms. Many Arab countries adopted a socialist model for economic development in the 1950s, which curtailed economic growth, encouraged the development of swollen bureaucracies, and prompted the creation of inefficient state-owned industries. It is no coincidence that Tunisia and Egypt, the first two

countries to experience the “Arab Spring,” had strong socialist legacies that resulted in corrosive corruption and dysfunctional bureaucracies that were perceived to oppress rather than serve citizens.

Washington should encourage governments to liberalize their economies, remove bureaucratic red tape, and encourage domestic and foreign investment to spur the development of a vibrant private sector.<sup>23</sup> Expensive state-owned enterprises should be privatized wherever possible, in a transparent and fair process to avoid the rise of crony capitalism. Expanding the private sector will fuel economic growth, spur job creation, and help create a larger middle class, which is an important building block for developing stable democracies.

Washington should encourage its Middle Eastern allies to strengthen protections for property rights and root out corruption by state authorities who seek to confiscate private property or exploit public property for their own benefit. Private enterprise, the chief engine of economic growth, cannot flourish unless entrepreneurs are free to expand their businesses without fear of government confiscation.

The United States also should encourage the negotiation of bilateral and regional free trade agreements. This would benefit Arab countries by eliminating trade barriers between them, as well as between them and the U.S. or European Union. Such agreements not only could lower the costs of imported goods but could

also expand Arab exports to U.S. or European markets. In Egypt’s case, if a free trade agreement with the United States seems unreachable in the short run, it should be encouraged to expand its Qualifying Industrial Zone system established jointly with Israel, which would allow it to increase exports to the United States. Such an arrangement would have the added benefit of giving the Egyptian government a greater stake in maintaining good relations with the United States and Israel.

**Work with Sub-State Actors in Hostile or Failing States.** The Arab uprisings have greatly weakened the authority and legitimacy of central governments in many countries. There are growing swathes of ungoverned space in Libya, Mali, Syria, and Yemen, where there are no reliable state authorities that can contain or restrain Islamist extremists or terrorists. In cases where Washington lacks a government ally, it should cultivate tribal leaders, political parties, or ethnic groups that can help mitigate the threat posed by al-Qaeda and other extremists.

In Syria, Washington should increase its support of the opposition to accelerate the fall of Bashar al-Assad’s hostile dictatorship: It should augment its current humanitarian aid, diplomatic support, and non-lethal technical support with enhanced financial aid and the discreet provision of arms and training to effective military commanders inside Syria who can be relied on to contain the influence of Islamist extremists and help build

22. The Heritage Foundation Counterterrorism Task Force, “A Counterterrorism Strategy for the ‘Next Wave,’” Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 98, August 24, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/08/a-counterterrorism-strategy-for-the-next-wave>.

23. The Heritage Foundation Economic Freedom Task Force, “America’s Global Agenda for Economic Freedom,” Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 101, February 17, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/02/americas-global-agenda-for-economic-freedom>.

an inclusive pluralist Syria after the Assad regime is toppled.<sup>24</sup> The longer the Syrian civil war continues, the more it is likely to fuel sectarian tensions that al-Qaeda and other Islamist extremists can exploit.

### **Conclusion**

The countries affected by the “Arab Spring” face much more difficult transitions to stable democracy than is generally recognized. Islamists have been the big winners in the political upheavals so far: They have captured the leadership of governments in Egypt and Tunisia, exert a growing influence in Libya, and play key roles in insurgencies in Mali, Syria, and Yemen. Although al-Qaeda played a small role in the initial phases of the Arab uprisings, it is now positioned to exploit the aftermath—chaos, anarchy, and power vacuums in failed or failing states.

It is in the U.S. national interest, as well as in the interests of U.S. allies and most Arabs, to prevent Islamist extremists from hijacking the unfinished revolutions and imposing totalitarian dictatorships in the affected countries. That will not happen without concerted focused leadership from Washington.

Proactive thoughtful engagement centered on protecting U.S. interests and promoting peace and prosperity in the region is a more cost-effective alternative to the cycle of violence and repression that is likely to emerge from the Arab uprisings if met with American indifference.

—*James Phillips is Senior Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.*

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24. James Phillips and Luke Coffey, “American Leadership Needed for Shaping a Post-Assad Syria,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 3654, July 2, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/07/syria-american-leadership-needed-for-shaping-a-post-assad-syria>.