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Ayman Al-Zawahiri in October 2011 Video

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SYRIAN OPPOSITION STATEMENTS DISAGREE ON APPROACHES TO RESISTANCE

The Syrian revolt against the Assad regime has been particularly intense in the city of Homs, as has been the regime’s violent response. Homs-based opposition leader and self-described “field coordinator of the revolution in Homs” Husayn Iryan recently described resistance operations in Homs in an interview with a pan-Arab daily (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 12). An industrial city of 1.5 million, Homs is located 160 km north of Damascus. The majority of its residents are Sunni Muslims, though there are significant minorities of Alawis and Christians. Armed clashes began in Homs in May, with the anti-regime Free Syrian Army launching operations in Homs in October.

Iryan presents an optimistic evaluation of the resistance efforts in Homs despite the daily “horrible crimes and massacres” perpetrated by the regime in that city: “Homs has managed in the last weeks to exhaust the Syrian regime and to weaken it to the extreme limits through non-stop protest movements despite all the restrictions, the siege and the massacres that the regime commits in the city against its sons.”

Iryan explains the viciousness of the regime's crackdown on the opposition in Homs by pointing to four factors:

- The city's proximity to Lebanon and the government's fears that this might enable Homs to become "like Benghazi" and slip from the regime's control.
- The Khalid bin al-Walid battalion of the armed opposition was formed in Homs, where splits in the regular army first occurred. The battalion, named for the 7th century Arab conqueror of Syria, is active in resisting the ongoing siege by loyalist forces. The formation of a second battalion of defectors called the Ali bin Abi Taleb Battalion (under the supervision of the Khalid bin al-Walid Battalion) was announced in the Homs Province city of Houla in late September (al-Jazeera, September 27).
- Homs was the first city to initiate civil disobedience, with citizens refusing to pay taxes and civil servants refusing to carry out their work.
- Revolutionary forces in Homs have inflicted casualties on the army, the intelligence services and government-sponsored "thugs" in the last few months.

For this resistance, Iryan says Homs, al-Qusayr and other towns and villages in the Homs Province had collectively suffered over a thousand dead, many of these consigned to mass graves. According to Iryan, even flight from Homs has become impossible due to the government cordon around the city: "Those who enter Homs can consider themselves doomed and those who manage to leave it consider that they have been given a new life."

Unlike the militancy of the Homs opposition, a vastly different assessment of the Syrian revolution came in an interview with Hasan Abd-al-Azim, the general coordinator of the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change in Syria. Al-Azim's committee represents some fifteen political parties, including Arab leftist groups and some Kurdish political parties: "We have parties whose hands are not covered in blood and corruption. We are hoping to have a pluralistic, parliamentary, and democratic state and a new system that satisfies all the aspirations of the Syrian people..."

Al-Azim, whose movement favors an "Arab solution" and opposes foreign intervention or the imposition of a no-fly zone, speaks of a "peaceful revolution in Syria which has not used weapons or violence as Al-Asad's regime is claiming" (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 11). In asserting the possibility that real change can be brought about in Syria by peaceful protest, al-Azim overlooks numerous reports of violence and the attempted assassination of the Yemeni president to cite "the peaceful Yemeni revolution that has entered its tenth month without the people using weapons, though weapons in Yemen are available in all houses and streets."

A veteran of various left-wing Arab nationalist parties, Abdul Azim has rejected a militant approach to the resistance, backing a moderate package of reforms leading to democracy that does not necessarily involve overthrowing the Assad regime (*al-Akhbar* [Beirut], September 21).

The disparate approaches to revolution in Syria in these two statements reflect the wider divisions that have plagued the Syrian opposition, differences that boiled over when some Syrian opposition figures were assaulted by other opposition members when they tried to enter the headquarters of the Arab League in Cairo for a meeting with the League's secretary-general (*al-Quds al-Arabi*, November 11).

THE FATIMID RETURN: SHI'A POLITICS IN POST-REVOLUTION EGYPT

Dr. Ahmad Rasim al-Nafis, a 59-year-old physician and university professor, has formed a Shiite political party in overwhelmingly Sunni Egypt. Known as al-Tahrir (Victory) Party, the group is still awaiting approval from Egyptian authorities to run in the upcoming parliamentary elections. Religious-based political parties are banned under Egyptian law, but several Sunni and Salafist movements have managed to gain official endorsement for new religiously-inspired political formations. Though no official figure is available, there are believed to be between 15,000 to 20,000 Shi'a Muslims in Egypt, though some sources put the number as high as 60,000.

In a recent interview, Dr. al-Nafis denied that his party was sectarian in nature, claiming to have support from certain liberals, communists, Copts and Sufis (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 13). According to al-Nafis, "If you want to classify us, we might call [al-Tahrir] a democratic, left-leaning, Islamic party... that calls on Egyptians to unite, follow the path of resistance and cut off the hand of American and Western hegemony in the region."

News of the party's formation has nonetheless angered Egypt's Salafist community, which opposes the Shi'a as "a deviant group which believes in the hidden Imam," as well as other various theological offenses. Salafist leader Dr. Gamal al-Marakibi has claimed the Tahrir Party will be controlled by Iran and act solely in its interests (*Aljewar.org*, May 25). However, a number of Egypt's Salafist groups have been accused of receiving funds from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, with Salafists coming under criticism after Saudi flags were raised during a massive Salafist rally in Cairo's Tahrir Square in late July (*Ilaf.com*, August 3).

Iran is eager to use the Egyptian Revolution as an opening for enhanced relations between the two countries, though Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmedinejad recently warned that "Enemies are concerned about the closeness of Iran-Egypt relations since they know there would be no place for the hegemonic powers if they stand by each other" (*Bikya Masr* [Cairo], November 8). Al-Nafis maintains that Egypt's relations with Muslim Iran should at least be at the level of Cairo's relations with Israel: "We should not be accused of treason because of our striving for this."

Al-Nafis downplays the growing political rift between Sunnis and Shiites that has evolved into a type of Cold War between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran: "The matter of the Shiite minority and the Sunni majority does not occupy our minds. We are Egyptian Muslims. We are proud of our Islam and our Egyptian-ness. We are proud of our position in the community, a position that does not spring from sectarian affiliation." Nonetheless, sectarian tensions in Egypt have worsened as the result of a small but growing number of Egyptian Sunni Muslims converting to Shi'ism, partly as a result of the appeal of Lebanon's Shi'a Hezbollah movement after its successful defense of southern Lebanon against Israeli invasion in 2006. Al-Nafis has firmly denied receiving Iranian funds to help spread Shi'ism in Egypt and claims such charges are only attempts to divide Egyptians through sectarianism.

Twelver Imami Shi'ism (al-Shi'a al-Imamiyah al-Ithna Ashariyah) was recognized as "a school of thought that is religiously correct to follow in worship" by the Shaykh of Cairo's al-Azhar University, Mahmoud Shalut, in 1959 (*al-Sha'ab* [Cairo], July 7, 1959). Under pressure from senior Saudi Wahhabi scholar Sa'ad bin Hamdan al-Ghamdi over his recognition of Shi'ism as an acceptable form of Islam, Shalut's successor at al-Azhar, Shaykh Ahmad al-Tayeb, reaffirmed the University's position on Shi'ism in 2010. Nonetheless, Egypt's growing Salafist movement is unlikely to take a positive view of the creation of a Shi'a-based political party in Egypt.

Egypt was once one of the world's most important centers for Shi'ism when the Isma'ili Shi'a Fatimid dynasty of Tunisia took power in Egypt in 909 C.E. Following the overthrow of the Fatimid Caliphate by the Sunni Ayyubids in 1171, many Egyptian Shiites fled to southern Egypt or Yemen. Most Shi'a in modern Egypt are "Twelver" Imami Shiites settled along the Red Sea coast, descendants of immigrants from Lebanon and Iran.

Muhammad al-Darini, an oft-imprisoned leader in the Egyptian Shi'a community (and a convert from Sunni Islam), told U.S. Embassy officials in 2009 that Iran should not be equated with Shi'a Islam, noting that "Iran looks after its national interests first, not Shi'a interests." In this sense, he suggested that Iran was more likely to deal with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood than Egypt's Shi'a community (*WikiLeaks*; U.S. Embassy Cairo cable of March 31, 2009, released on August 20, 2011).

Wahhabist Militancy in Bosnia Profits from Local and International Inaction

Nenad Pejic

Though the United States once took the lead in international efforts to save the Muslims of Bosnia during the bitter conflict that struck that nation in the 1990s, it is now under attack by the Salafist/Wahhabist community that began to flourish there after foreign jihadists were allowed to settle in Bosnia after the conflict. The current Wahhabist perception of America has even found its way into song:

*America and other adversaries should know
that now the Muslims
are one like the Taliban
listen, brothers,
believers of the world
with dynamite on their chest
lead the path to dzennet (heaven)*

The above lyrics were written by Bilal Bosnic, a Wahhabi community leader from the city of Bihac in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) (radiosarajevo.ba, November 4). [1] Bosnic sings it at weddings and other kinds of social gatherings. How, then, did America become the enemy of radical Islam in the Balkans after undertaking two military interventions aimed at protecting Muslim civilians (Bosnia in 1994 and Kosovo in 1999)?

Many claim that Islamic extremism established itself among Bosnian Muslims thanks to the “inaction” of the West when the 1991 UN arms embargo left Muslims defenseless and when the West failed to secure UN protection zones in Srebrenica, Zepa and Gorazde during the war. The failure to protect these zones led to what some termed the first post-WWII genocide in Europe. This “inaction” gives a partial explanation but not a complete one. There is another “inaction” of local origin that contributed much more to the growing influence of Islamic extremists in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

There are countless examples of local authorities in Bosnia failing to act properly against Islamic extremism. The majority of these criminal cases have not been resolved and when the terrorists are identified the trials take years. There are some claims that “inaction” in

Bosnia had its roots nearly 20 years ago when Bosnian authorities granted 50 passports to foreign mujahideen, most of whom were Salafist/Wahhabis (*Oslobodjenje* [Sarajevo], November 3). This “inaction” is not related to the police or court capacity or poor equipment, but rather to the ethnically divided BiH police and judiciary that has political sponsorship.

Islamic community leaders and local politicians described terrorism acts in BiH as isolated “criminal acts” and not a consequence of growing Islamic extremism. Attempts to initiate police investigations of the Wahhabi movement were often defined as Islamophobic. The head of Bosnia’s Islamic community, Reis Mustafa Efendija Ceric, has adopted a controversial approach to the Wahhabi community in Bosnia, defending their right to pursue their own interpretation of Islam: “Understanding faith differently is everybody’s right. We can or cannot agree with them but we have no right to prosecute anybody as long as they do not violate the law” (Daily.tportal.hr [Zagreb], September 8, 2010).

Responding in 2009 to remarks by a Croatian Cardinal regarding the difference between the moderate traditional form of Bosnian Islam and the “newly imported Wahhabi mentality,” Ceric told a gathering of Bosnian Muslims:

“You are old Bosnian Muslims, whom they call desirable, and for whom they say they are sorry, because there are not more of you and because they dislike the new Muslims, whom they call Wahhabi... It is unacceptable and malicious to spread fear about new Bosnian Muslims... Bosnian Muslims, the old ones, were killed because they were weak, and the new ones, who are ready to protect their honor and freedom, have never, and will never, endanger anyone’s right to life, religion, freedom, property, and honor” [2]

After a Serbian Muslim with ties to the Wahhabist community opened fire on the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo on October 28, Ceric condemned “violence and terror on behalf of Islam,” adding that terrorism “manipulates” Islam and “discredits” it (Sarjevo-x.com, November 6). Similar expressions were heard from many local politicians.

However, Ceric and others are forgetting their responsibility for increasingly imposing Islamic practices

on all citizens of the country that lasts for years. They haven't been commenting on why they tolerate the implementation of a parallel legal system (Shari'a) in Gornja Maoca, a village dominated by Wahhabi Bosniaks and site of a major counterterrorism operation in February 2010 (Reuters, February 2, 2010). They don't talk about why they took little action after previous terrorist attacks. According to Sadik Ahmetovic, head of the Bosnian Security Agency: "After the Bugojno attack [on a police station in June, 2010], we proposed several measures, but half of them were refused by parliament and condemned by the Islamic community of Bosnia" (RFE/RL Balkan Service, October 28).

The inaction of the international community and local leadership in dealing with militant Islam in BiH goes perfectly well with two opposing "actions" that fuel Islam radicalism in BiH. The first is the aggressive behavior and rhetoric of the Bosnian Serbs. Their leader, Republika Srpska president Milorad Dodik, said in October that:

The struggle of the Bosniaks for their national identity is completely tied to the idea of creating some kind of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Bosniaks are a people that exist only in Bosnia-Herzegovina and only declared themselves a people sometime around 1993. They are stubbornly trying to prove their national identity, which they can only do by destroying the nationality of others -- primarily, of the other constituent ethnic groups of Bosnia (RFE/RL, October 14).

Other examples can be found in alarming assessments of the Islamist threat to Bosnia's Serbs that appear in the local media. A daily based in the Republika Srpska capital of Banjaluka recently claimed that Wahhabis now constituted 5% of the FBiH population (far in excess of figures out of Sarajevo) and had concentrated in 17 mostly rural municipalities along the border (the "Inter-Entity Line") with the Republika Srpska (Nezavisne Novine [Banjaluka], November 1).

The second aggressive "action" is the "aid" that comes from the Arab world. At the beginning of the war this aid took the form of arms, while later on it consisted of money that supported building mosques and madrassas. On June 23, 2000, the author asked the war-time President of Bosnia and Herzegovina,

Mr. Alija Izetbegovic, why he did not use money the country had received from Saudi Arabia for building factories, creating jobs etc., to which he replied: "They would never give me money for factories!" [3] Today, it is widely believed in Bosnia that certain Arab states provide financial aid to Wahhabis and their families.

Tensions between the various BiH communities have been reinforced by a segregated education system that keeps the Bosnian youth divided along ethnic and religious lines. Additionally, the local media perpetuates these divisions, fracturing the fabric of Bosnia's multiethnic society. According to a Mostar daily, terrorism has created new splits in Bosnia-Herzegovina along ethnic lines: "In Republic Srpska [the ethnic-Serb majority republic that is one of the two main political entities that forms Bosnia-Herzegovina] the danger of radical Islam is overestimated and Muslim leaders underestimate it by saying that terrorism does not belong to any specific religion or ethnic group" (*Dnevni List* [Mostar], November 11).

There are a minimum of 3,000 Wahhabis in Bosnia-Herzegovina according to security studies, and many more that sympathize with them. They are not of significant numbers but they pose a significant threat. Their influence is growing not only in Bosnia but also in the Sandzak area of Serbia, where Bosniaks are in the majority.

This is the Balkan version of an approaching perfect storm. An Atlantic Initiative report argues that Bosnia needs "credible deterrence." This would "not only prevent a return to violent conflict, but would create the potential for forward movement.... Restored, credible deterrence is the sine qua non of any political and social progress in Bosnia and Herzegovina." [4] However, "credible deterrence" can only be imposed by the international community, the same international community that joins the overall "inaction" when it "agrees to disagree."

When terrorist Mevlid Jasarevic failed to kill any Americans during the October 28 attack on the U.S. Embassy in the Bosnian capital, Sarajevans joked: "He did not pass the al-Qaeda entry exam!" Just how much truth there is in this joke will depend on how much "inaction" will be replaced by "action" from local authorities and the international community.

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Notes:

1. Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) consists of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH – majority Muslim), the Republika Srpska (RS – majority Serbian Orthodox Christian) and the Brčko District, a tiny self-governing administrative unit.
2. Translation provided by a U.S. Embassy cable. Wikileaks: U.S. Embassy Sarajevo Cable, February 24, 2009; released September 1, 2011, <http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=09SARAJEVO226>.
3. Author's interview with Alija Izetbegovic, Sarajevo, June 23, 2000.
4. "A Security Risk Analysis – Assessing the Potential for Renewed Ethnic Violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina," Atlantic Initiative and Democratization Policy Council, October 2011, http://www.atlanticinitiative.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=386%3Aa-security-risk-analysis--assessing-the-potential-for-renewed-ethnic-violence-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina&catid=42%3A-rokstories&lang=en.

Turkey Anxiously Weighs Cost of Escalation with Syria

Matthew M. Reed

After a long thaw, Turkish-Syrian relations reached new heights in 2009 as Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad initiated a new phase in bilateral relations. In September of that year, visa restrictions were lifted and cross-border trade flourished. High-level meetings produced the Turkish-Syrian Strategic Cooperation Council Agreement a month later. The agreement institutionalized direct contact for the first time, resulting in a cascade of treaties. Joint cabinet meetings and military exercises were held that year and in 2010. The significance of these developments remain hard to overstate; after decades of Cold War feuding and tensions that nearly produced war twice, Turkey and Syria began working towards a friendlier, more prosperous future. That future, however, is now in doubt, as goodwill began evaporating once Assad unleashed his forces on democratic protestors last March.

Turkish leaders initially tried to convert years of diplomacy into a peaceful solution. Erdogan phoned Assad repeatedly. He then blamed Bashar's brother, Maher, for pursuing the crackdown, apparently hoping that Bashar would distance himself from the regime's hard-core and stop the violence (*Today's Zaman*, June 10). A pro-Assad mob responded by attacking the Turkish Embassy in Damascus on June 13. Syrian officials accused Turkey of taking orders from Washington. Meanwhile, Turkey allowed the Syrian opposition to organize in Istanbul as diplomatic efforts continued.

Turkey's ambassador to Syria visited the devastated city of Hama in August. The next day Erdogan announced a diplomatic breakthrough was imminent. "Our ambassador went to Hama and said that the tanks, security forces had started to leave Hama. This is highly important to show that our initiatives had positive results." Erdogan added that Assad's promised reforms would come within days (AFP, August 10). However, no reforms were instituted and the violence worsened. Turkish-Syrian relations deteriorated even further and according to remarks made by Erdogan in September, contacts were suspended, thus voiding the diplomatic gains of 2009. Most recently, Turkey's embassy and

consulates came under attack again on November 12, leading the Syrian Foreign Minister to apologize, and his Turkish counterpart to meet with the Syrian opposition. As of today, Turkey's posture is hostile but restrained.

After Syria's state-run media claimed refugee camps in Turkey were "centers of isolation full of rape and torture," Erdogan pledged to visit the camps and threatened to impose unilateral sanctions on Syria (*Hurriyet*, September 21; *al-Arabiya*, October 21). In late October, Turkey's Foreign Ministry went a step further and arranged for reporters to meet Colonel Riyad Musa al-Asa'd, a Syrian defector and commander of the Free Syrian Army who organizes resistance from Turkish territory (see *Terrorism Monitor* Brief, October 14). Erdogan's rhetoric shifted dramatically during this period as he began referring to the Syrian opposition as the "glorious resistance" (*Today's Zaman*, November 1). In September, Erdogan warned Assad that the "era of repressive regimes has ended" (*al-Jazeera*, September 17). Turkish media took an anti-Syrian bent, matching Erdogan's tone. New terrorist attacks by Kurdish separatists of the Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK) have further complicated tensions; with many in Turkey blaming Syria and Iran for the recent violence they believe is retaliation for Turkey's tough stance.

Turkey's Syria policy, however, remains tempered by apprehension - the country's inaction certainly proves this. Erdogan's populist streak guarantees he will condemn Assad's brutality, but, after revealing the presence of Syrian rebels in Turkey, the Turkish Foreign Ministry has curbed its bravado. Regardless of threats made months ago, Turkey still has not sanctioned Syria, most likely because Turkey's business elite stands to lose too. Perhaps most conspicuous of all, Erdogan never fulfilled his promise to visit the refugee camps. Indeed, action remains elusive as officials calculate the cost of escalation. Should Turkey encourage regime change, officials know Syria and Iran - Assad's only ally - could strike back by supporting the PKK.

Military confrontation remains unlikely although relations are reaching new lows. Striking the PKK would require action in Iraq rather than Syria; and attacking Assad for his encouragement of Kurdish terrorists would risk an all-out war, for which there is no popular support in Turkey. After some debate, it appears Turkey is no longer considering the creation of a humanitarian buffer zone in Syrian territory either. Turkey's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, admitted last month that military options were on the table but invasion

was not an option (*Hurriyet*, October 7). Erdogan and the military are also sending different signals. In August, Erdogan referred to Syria as Turkey's "internal problem" (*Milliyet*, October 31). Last month, however, Turkey's Chief of Staff, General Necdet Ozel, disagreed during a television interview, arguing that Syrian unrest was "primarily the internal problem of that country" (*Milliyet*, October 31).

The prospect of terrorism, the complicated nature of military solutions, and unrealized threats combine to suggest the cost of escalation is still too high for Turkey's leaders. Condemnations will continue but the tipping point could be months away. The problem for Turkey is that it remains the only neighbor with any leverage; the country enjoys economic ties with Syria, which it could sever, and previous good relations, which it could revive. Other countries will consequently push Turkey towards decisive action, but with military operations being the least likely outcome for now.

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Al-Qaeda and Algiers Struggle to Cope with the Implications of the Arab Spring

Dario Cristiani

Al-Qaeda's media arm released a video from Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri in October that focused mainly on American "defeats," but also offered the al-Qaeda leader's views on Algeria. Al-Zawahiri called upon the people of Algeria to rise up against their government, which he claimed was guilty, among other things, of fighting the imposition of Shari'a in Algeria and serving the interests of America and France in the Mediterranean. Al-Zawahiri also called on the soldiers of Islam in the region (i.e. al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb - AQIM) to offer an example of jihad and resistance (as-Sahab Media, October 11). [1] On October 17, al-Qaeda's media wing posted another video entitled "Algeria and the Battle of Patience" by senior al-Qaeda commander Abu Yahya al-Libi. This message called upon Algerians to depose President Bouteflika and his regime (as-Sahab Media, October 18):

Rise up with your sons and bring back your uprising against a fragile, shaky regime, as life is chances, and the winds are winds of change, and relenting and settling won't work with it. Should your winds blow, take advantage of them, as after each storm there will be calm... So, revolt O defiant people in the face of injustice and tyranny with higher determination and stronger challenge in order to overthrow this moldy regime that stole your revolution, wasted your wealth and enriched your enemy with your money, and caused you poverty and forbade you to have the best of your resources, and opened your country for the bastards of the West to enjoy your resources, and made your honorable sons displaced around the world asking for peoples' help. [2]

Why then, has al-Qaeda Central turned its focus to Algeria at this time?

A Contextual Assessment

These statements must be contextualized in a wider political and strategic framework and in light of the dynamics of change working in the region and interacting with global and long-term trends. There are three main contexts, which can be divided in three geopolitical circles:

- **Global Dynamics:** These statements are an attempt by al-Qaeda Central to retain the political initiative. The capture and death of Bin Laden represented a great symbolic blow to the organization, whose operational capabilities were already in decline. For al-Qaeda/jihadist elements, Algeria has a strong importance for historical reasons but several current trends and developments have attracted al-Qaeda's attention: Algeria is in the midst of a vast year-old regional turmoil, it has good relations (more or less) with all the main "far enemies" of al-Qaeda (the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Spain); it supported, although not very vocally, Mu'ammr Qaddafi until the end of his regime and its political balance is currently considered fragile.

These messages are likely also a signal to AQIM to become more resolute in its fight against the Algerian government. AQIM suffers from the same problems as al-Qaeda Central: It has lost the political initiative over the past few years and despite some recent signs of survival, the group's ability to attack the Algerian government has decreased progressively.

- **Regional Troubles:** One of the novelties of the Arab Spring revolts was that, from the very beginning, they were not characterized by a resolute Islamist rhetoric. However, the lack of a radical Islamist discourse in the uprisings does not entail the end of Islamist forces as main political players in the region.

The increasing prominence of Islamist groups in Libya, the victory of Ennahada in Tunisian elections and the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian political

transition show that Islamist-oriented groups still remain among the region's most organized political and social groups. Al-Qaeda is ideologically and politically remote from many of these players. However, this broadly considered Islamist awakening is seen as an opportunity for the movement to re-enter the political and ideological window of the Arab Spring, in which Al Qaeda has had trouble finding a place since the earliest days of the revolts.

- **The National Arena:** In the early weeks of the Arab Spring, Algeria was considered a serious candidate to follow the same path as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. However, this did not happen, although there were reports of demonstrations, strikes and clashes in Algeria. The nation's domestic political picture is becoming more and more complicated as social and political cleavages emerge, but that does not automatically entail that the regime will be destroyed. There is strong potential for an increasing destabilization of the Algerian institutional and political landscape due to questions over the health of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and intelligence chief General Mohamed "Toufik" Mediène, housing shortages, sustained inflation in food prices, structural corruption and tensions over the distribution of wealth. With parliamentary elections upcoming in 2012 and presidential elections following in 2014, these elements likely entered into the calculations of al-Qaeda's leaders when deciding to release these statements.

The Fragile Status Quo

Paradoxically, there is a convergence of views between al-Qaeda and some Western views on the inevitability of the domino effect in considering the Arab Spring. Algeria was for some time considered to be the next in line for a national uprising. However, when the Arab Spring is discussed in the context of Algeria, the discussion must take into account developments in Algeria since 1988. Unlike Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, Algeria has already experienced a large-scale insurgency since the thorny elections of 1991. Although this did not end in regime change, its enormous impact on the political scene in

Algeria is the major factor in understanding whether there is room in Algeria for another huge uprising that would provide an opportunity for AQIM to exploit it.

Currently, the elements supporting the political status quo seem stronger than those against, at least in the short term. Whether these balances are sustainable in the longer run remain to be seen; indeed, some developments – demographic pressure, persisting youth unemployment, an economy still too much dependent on oil revenues and the likely drop in gas production starting in 2012 - will likely reduce the sustainability of the current Algerian political balance. However, there are significant elements supporting a fragile and unstable status quo. In decreasing order of importance, these are:

- **The memory of the civil war of the 1990s:** Together with the enormous violence of the war of independence against the French colonizer, this represents an enormous psychological burden for Algerians, without distinction between social classes and geographical origins. This is by far the most important element in understanding why Algerians are so hesitant to experience another round of large-scale political violence.
- **A more consistent government paternalism:** As a rentier state, a paternal use of economic resources was common in Algeria. In the wake of the Arab Spring, the political power structure has been able to use money to reduce political tensions. This situation is different from the late 1980s, when Algeria was in a far more difficult economic situation given the crisis in global oil prices and the failure of its socialist economic model. Since the beginning of the general regional uprising, Algerian authorities have increased public sector wages, provide more generous food subsidies to face food inflation and given handouts to unemployed youth (Reuters, October 20). Moreover, huge infrastructure projects focused on reducing the impact of housing shortage are ongoing. The levels

of Algeria's foreign currency reserves, currently estimated at about \$150 billion, can allow Algerian authorities to keep working on this track.

- The losing appeal of radical Islamist messages: In the late 1980s, Islamist narratives were the only catalyst of discontent in an ideological and political landscape dominated by socialist ideology and rhetoric, which were identified by Islamists with the existing power structure and therefore considered illegitimate. Now, however, radical Islamist messages have lost their appeal given the violence of the past 20 years and the presence of moderate Islamist parties in the political mainstream of the country, a significant difference from the one party system of the 1980s dominated by the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN).
- The interests of the external players in stability: In the case of Libya, some of the main external players had an interest in getting rid of Qaddafi, including France, the UK, the United States and eventually Italy. However, this convergence of aims is unlikely to be replicated and their stances on Syria, apart from some rhetorical peaks, demonstrate a lack of interest in providing open and resolute support for other revolts. In the case of Algeria, this element is important as Algiers is a fundamental actor for the overall security of the Maghrebi/Saharan/Sahelian region as well as the Mediterranean region. Washington and Paris have a strong interest in the stability provided by Algeria. Moreover, Algerian energy supplies are key to the energy needs of Italy, which is now in financial crisis. No external government, even among those rhetorically committed to supporting democracy, has any interest in supporting a possible destabilization of Algeria.
- The strange openness of the political system: Although it remains an authoritarian country, the political system of Algeria is now more open than it was

20 to 25 years ago. Debates and clashes between political factions and players are frequent and the press openly criticizes political personalities and factions in a rather open fashion compared to the standards of the wider Middle East and North Africa area.

- On the other hand, this openness helps avoid any unexpected explosion of political and social conflict, as happened in the nations more affected by the Arab Spring.
- The “normality” of discontent: Demonstrations, strikes and protests are a common features of the Algerian the political landscape, giving Algiers more experience than its neighbors in handling political and social turbulence. The opposition, moreover, is fragmented, with none of its main leaders able to present an ideological alternative appealing to a large segment of the population.
- The lack of Tahrir Square-style mass protests. This absence is explained by the peculiar geographical features of the Algerian urban landscape: for instance, Algiers is characterized by a lack of large open spaces, with very few wide boulevards and squares, thus discouraging huge gatherings of people (Jadaliyya.com, September 16; *Daily Star*, [Beirut], February 8).

Conclusion

Al-Qaeda, in general, was incapable of asserting its influence over the events of the Arab Spring, suffering from a general inability to impose its ideological imprint on the narratives of discontent in the Arab and wider Islamic world over the past decade. Though the movement can exploit development to gain greater room to maneuver, as in the Egyptian Sinai and the Sahel following the Libyan war, politically and ideologically, al-Qaeda has remained removed from development. Placed in a situation of weakness on a global scale following Bin Laden's death, al-Qaeda is now trying to retain some political significance. In its current perceptions, Algeria is now the weak link in the wider Middle East-North Africa region and one in which, given the presence of a clear and active franchise, al-Qaeda would try to integrate itself into the dynamics

of the Arab Spring by pushing for demonstrations and regime change. The operational links between al-Qaeda Central and AQIM remain weak but it is likely that these statements were a suggestion for AQIM to take action.

The strategic picture for AQIM has improved over the past few months amid the implosion of Qaddafi's regime and the more general increase in regional instability, with weapons and veteran fighters spreading through the Sahel.

As confirmed recently by an AQIM commander, AQIM acquired weapons from Libya during the collapse of the Qaddafi regime and is trying to stress its ideological connection with the Libyan Islamists (Agence Nouakchott d'Information, November 9; *Jeune Afrique*, November 10). The strategic developments of the Arab Spring could help AQIM to increase its operational profile and refocus its attention on opposing the Algerian regime rather than smuggling activities in the Sahel, an outcome more likely if the Kabylia-based AQIM leadership can retain control over its autonomous and quasi-independent units in the Sahel. AQIM will also benefit if the process of state-building in Libya proves more complicated than hoped and the main focus of the Algerian security services remains domestic stability rather than counter-insurgency operations directed at AQIM.

However, it is not very likely that AQIM, as we know it today, could succeed in exploiting and at the same time reinforcing discontent against the Algerian government as it lacks the ideological depth and political flexibility to attract other segments of the opposition galaxy. Moreover, AQIM suffers from a strong unpopularity among ordinary citizens because of its kidnappings and its status as the latest incarnation of the groups fighting in the 1990s. AQIM, and consequently al-Qaeda Central, could benefit from the Arab Spring's impact on Algeria more from a strictly operational than broadly political point of view.

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Notes:

1. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&v=5qdFOTl-Kc4>.
2. See <http://aljahad.com/vb/showthread.php?t=12879>.