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THE CULTURE AND CONFLICT REVIEW



Coalitional Insights: A Post-Jihad Era? Arab Spring Brings West and Islamists into an Unexpected – and Potentially Transformative – Alliance

Barry S. Zellen, 10/1/2011

With the Arab world continuing to experience an unprecedented wave of people-powered revolutions that caught both the West and its Islamist opponents in the War on Terror off guard, we are beginning to see the strategic principles articulated and successfully implemented by Gandhi in his liberation struggle against the militarily more powerful British raj supersede the more bellicose but perhaps less effective efforts by both terrorist and counterterrorist, insurgent and counterinsurgent, in their deadly but inconclusive dance. Tired of this long fight, and its endless use of force and violence by both sides with the civilian populace caught in between as if in a deadly vise, the popular mass of the Arab street has risen up to set things right, using methods overlooked by combatants on both sides, alienated as equally from the nihilistic violence of the terrorists as from the unholy alliance of the West with the repressive dictatorships which stood at the West's side, using Western funds and Western arms to repress their own people.

Osama Bin Laden long sought to bring his war to the far enemy, and by striking fear in the hearts of the West, to cut off the benefactors of the "apostate regimes" he sought to overthrow. And in many ways he has succeeded, putting into a motion a dynamic and cascading series of strategic interactions that empowered the very people he sought to liberate. The irony is, however, that these newly liberated peoples reject not only the tyrannies of these apostate regimes, but the Islamist vision and the violent means employed in the global jihad. What we are seeing, in short, is the start of the *post-jihad* era, where the polarized bifurcation of secular and Islamist is as unnatural and unsustainable as the ideological split that defined the Cold War.

While history will show a causal link between Osama Bin Laden's war against the West and the wave of liberating people-power now sweeping across the Middle East and North Africa, it was in rejection of not only Bin Laden's war, but the Western response, that the people of the Arab world rose up, liberating themselves and deposing the tyrants who had long oppressed them in the name of stability. What started as a bold speech delivered early in President Obama's term calling for a "new beginning" in Cairo, a call to the Muslim world to choose a different path, one of mutual respect and cooperation with the West, has become a revolutionary declaration of war against the status quo that is now transforming the entire region, and which could continue to echo around the world. As Obama then proclaimed:

We meet at a time of great tension between the United States and Muslims around the world -- tension rooted in historical forces that go beyond any current policy debate. The relationship between Islam and the West includes centuries of coexistence and cooperation, but also conflict and religious wars. More recently, tension has been fed by colonialism that denied rights and opportunities to many Muslims, and a Cold War in which Muslim-majority countries were too often treated as proxies without regard to their own aspirations. Moreover, the sweeping change brought by modernity and globalization led many Muslims to view the West as hostile to the traditions of Islam.

Violent extremists have exploited these tensions in a small but potent minority of Muslims. The attacks of September 11, 2001 and the continued efforts of these extremists to engage in violence against civilians has led some in my country to view

Islam as inevitably hostile not only to America and Western countries, but also to human rights. All this has bred more fear and more mistrust. So long as our relationship is defined by our differences, we will empower those who sow hatred rather than peace, those who promote conflict rather than the cooperation that can help all of our people achieve justice and prosperity. And this cycle of suspicion and discord must end.[1]

As Tunisian President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and later Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak fled into the night in early 2011, a new tidal wave of people-powered revolutionary change has spread both east and west with Jasmine revolutions breaking out across the region, each time making President Obama's words sound audaciously prescient. A war proclaimed over a decade earlier Al Qaeda now stands a chance of concluding decisively, not with the emergence of a new caliphate as Osama bin Laden has long sought, but more along the lines sought by President Obama, as a new cooperative spirit uniting Islam and the West emerges.

A hint of this cooperative spirit was evident in the coalition that came together to battle Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya, with American air and sea power leading the way, the NATO alliance united at its side, the Arab league and the United Nations blessing the intervention, and a motley crew of secular democratic activists and Islamist militants on the ground, fighting to create a free Libya. While described, and formally sanctioned on March 18, 2011 by U.N. Security Council resolution 1973 as a humanitarian intervention, its avowed goal the protection of civilians from what seemed to be the imminent specter of mass slaughter, just below the surface lurks the principal Western powers' stated policy of regime change, a source of alarm to some critics wary of the ever present risk of mission creep, and concerned that America was again wading into the complex minefield of tribal politics that define much of the still-evolving Islamic world—once again naively expecting its precision application of force to be nursemaid to the birth of a new democracy.

In early 2011, across the Middle East, Arab states found themselves in a tectonic collision with powerful internal forces as the region convulsed as the long repressed power of the individual was unlocked in unison on a vast and historic scale, akin to the democratic transformation that swept communism from power in Eastern and Central Europe a generation ago. The complex eddies in this struggle have been fascinating to observe—nowhere more so than in Libya; side-by-side with secular democratic activists stood militant jihadists fresh from fighting the Americans in Iraq, now under the benevolent, indeed emancipatory, protection of NATO air power as they marched toward Tripoli.[2] There was even the hint of an emergent grand alliance, not unlike that assembled by President George H.W. Bush to eject Iraq from Kuwait in 1990-91, or that more spirited and ambitious alliance cobbled together a decade earlier by President Ronald Reagan that would unwittingly spawn Al Qaeda, when the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan came together with the mujahideen as comrades-in-arms in the mountains of South Asia and waged their heroic holy war against their joint nemesis, the Soviet Red Army.

It took the very toppling the dictatorships that Bin Laden's jihad so long sought to topple for the "suspicion and discord" (as described by Obama in Cairo) between the West and Muslim world as described by President Obama to begin to heal, and for a new relationship to take form. And so, one could argue, the transformation of the Arab world now under way is the fruit borne of two seemingly incompatible visions, one articulated eloquently by the late jihadist leader Osama bin Laden, and the other articulated equally as eloquently by President Barack H. Obama—a fusion reminiscent of that which took place between the East and West at the Cold War's historic, and decisive, end, when under the cascading pressures unleashed in part by Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms, the peoples of the Soviet bloc threw off their tyrannies, and joined the West, not in defeat, but in a stunning victory for those captive peoples.

Obama's hope for this new beginning now looks within reach, something widely believed to be highly improbable just a short time ago. The largely nonviolent wave of people-power sweeping the Arab world caught not only the West off guard; it also appeared to have left al-Qaeda's usually outspoken propagandists uncharacteristically short of words. As *CNN* terrorism correspondent Peter Bergen explained, "Osama bin Laden must be sitting in his comfortably appointed hideaway somewhere in northwest Pakistan watching the events in the Middle East unfold with a mixture of glee and despair. Glee, because overthrowing the dictatorships and monarchies of the Middle East has long been his central goal. Despair, because none of the Arab revolutions has anything to do with him." [3]

But it would not be long before al-Qaeda would refute one half of Bergen's claim. In the fifth edition of *Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's* (AQAP's) English-language magazine *Inspire*, published in March 2011, editor Yahya Ibrahim wrote that the West "believes that the revolts are bad for al Qaeda," but

argues otherwise: "This is not the case. Why would the freedoms being granted to the people be bad for al Qaeda? If freedom is so bad for al Qaeda, how come the West has been practicing a restriction on the freedoms of expression when it comes to the message of the mujahidin?"^[4] Added Ibrahim: "Another line that is being pushed by Western leaders is that because the protests in Egypt and Tunisia were peaceful, they proved al Qaeda—which calls for armed struggle—to be wrong. That is another fallacy. Al Qaeda is not against regime changes through protests but it is against the idea that the change should be only through peaceful means to the exclusion of the use of force;" he added that "[i]f the protesters in Libya did not have the flexibility to use force when needed, the uprising would have been crushed. It is our opinion that the revolutions that are shaking the thrones of dictators are good for the Muslims, good for the mujahidin and bad for the imperialists of the West and their henchmen in the Muslim world. We are very optimistic and have great expectations of what is to come."^[5]

And in his article in the same edition of *Inspire*, the Yemeni-American AQAP regional commander, Anwar al-Awlaki (who would be killed by a U.S. drone strike soon after the seventh edition of *Inspire* came to press in September 2011) observed, much like President Obama has, that this wave of "revolution broke the barriers of fear in the hearts and minds that the tyrants couldn't be removed," fostering a sea change across the region as a new hope that change was possible set in: "After the Algerian crises of the past decade when the elections brought victory to the Islamists, a civil war ensued that resulted in large scale bloodshed and caused many to think that any attempt for change would bring with it more tyranny than what they want to remove."^[6]

Offering his insights on what the West is really thinking but not saying, he observed that "Western leaders realize that it would be unwise to reveal their true feelings of what is happening. The West knows that it would be unwise to stand by their friends when the masses have spoken out and asked for freedom, a principle the West claims that it stands for. But it seems that the West either does not know what is awaiting them or does know but wants to put on an optimistic face."^[7] As al-Awlaki admitted, "We do not know yet what the outcome would be, and we do not have to. The outcome doesn't have to be an Islamic government for us to consider what is occurring to be a step in the right direction. Regardless of the outcome, ... our mujahidin brothers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and the rest of the Muslim world will get a chance to breathe again after three decades of suffocation."^[8]

And directly responding to Bergen's February 23, 2011 comments, al-Awlaki wrote:

Doesn't the West realize how the jihadi work would just take off as soon as the regimes of the Gulf start crumbling? Peter Bergen believes that al Qaeda is viewing the events with glee and despair. Glee yes, but not despair. The mujahidin around the world are going through a moment of elation and I wonder whether the West is aware of the upsurge of mujahidin activity in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, Arabia, Algeria, and Morocco? ... America, since 9-11, has been focused on the fight with the mujahidin in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and now Yemen. It has devoted its resources and intelligence for the "fight on terror". But with what is happening now in the Arab world, America would no doubt have to divert some of its attention to the unexpected avalanche that is burying its dear friends. America has depended on these men for the dirty work of protecting the American imperial interests. They acted as point men that saved America the effort of doing it themselves but now with their fall, America would have to divert huge amounts of effort and money to cultivate a new breed of collaborators. This would force America, which is already an exhausted empire, to spread itself thin, which in turn would be a great benefit for the mujahidin. Even without this wave of change in the Muslim world, the jihad movement was on the rise. With the new developments in the area, one can only expect that the great doors of opportunity would open up for the mujahidin all over the world.^[9]

But it was not just al-Qaeda that viewed this unexpected wave of revolutionary change sweeping the Arab world with hope. Indeed, it was this very same spirit of hope that imbued President Obama's 2009 Cairo speech. It is this mutuality of hope in a future long marked by conflict and despair that points the way forward to a *post-jihad* era, and a possible end to the War on Terror. As Obama's Cairo speech concluded:

All of us share this world for but a brief moment in time. The question is whether we spend that time focused on what pushes us apart, or whether we commit ourselves to an effort—a sustained effort—to find common ground, to focus on the future we seek for our children, and to respect the dignity of all human beings. It's easier to start wars than to end them. It's easier to blame others than to look inward. It's easier to see what is

different about someone than to find the things we share. But we should choose the right path, not just the easy path.

There's one rule that lies at the heart of every religion—that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. This truth transcends nations and peoples—a belief that isn't new; that isn't black or white or brown; that isn't Christian or Muslim or Jew. It's a belief that pulsed in the cradle of civilization, and that still beats in the hearts of billions around the world. It's a faith in other people, and it's what brought me here today. We have the power to make the world we seek, but only if we have the courage to make a new beginning.[10]

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