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14. ABSTRACT

The death of Usama bin Laden (UBL) and the Arab Spring has led to multiple pronouncements suggesting Al Qaeda's (AQ) strategic defeat is near. Such judgments may be premature, as AQ's operational center of gravity (COG) – its affiliate network collectively known as AQ and Associated Movements (AQAM) – has not been significantly weakened by these events, and enables AQ to remain a viable terror organization. Tied together by a common ideology which still finds resonance in a post-Arab Spring Muslim world, AQAM retains the capability and intent to conduct terror operations despite the loss of their ideological leader. Moreover, UBL's death and the Arab Spring may offer AQAM certain opportunities for growth, as AQAM elements vie for strategic control of the movement and exploit potential dissatisfaction with Arab Spring outcomes. As AQAM evolves in the post-UBL, post-Arab Spring world, approaches to combating its influence must evolve as well, with renewed emphasis on countering AQ's narrative while broadening kinetic efforts to reduce AQAM's freedom of movement at the operational level of war.

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The Effect of bin Laden's Death and Arab Spring
on Al Qaeda's Operational Center of Gravity

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the
requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

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Abstract

The death of Usama bin Laden (UBL) and the Arab Spring has led to multiple pronouncements suggesting Al Qaeda's (AQ) strategic defeat is near. Such judgments may be premature, as AQ's operational center of gravity (COG) – its affiliate network collectively known as AQ and Associated Movements (AQAM) – has not been significantly weakened by these events, and enables AQ to remain a viable terror organization. Tied together by a common ideology which still finds resonance in a post-Arab Spring Muslim world, AQAM retains the capability and intent to conduct terror operations despite the loss of their ideological leader. Moreover, UBL's death and the Arab Spring may offer AQAM certain opportunities for growth, as AQAM elements vie for strategic control of the movement and exploit potential dissatisfaction with Arab Spring outcomes. As AQAM evolves in the post-UBL, post-Arab Spring world, approaches to combating its influence must evolve as well, with renewed emphasis on countering AQ's narrative while broadening kinetic efforts to reduce AQAM's freedom of movement at the operational level of war.

Introduction

To casual observers, 2011 was not a good year for Al Qaeda (AQ). Even before the

beginning the year, the wave of popular uprisings known as the Arab Spring was gaining

momentum in North Africa, and would soon result in the overthrow of long-standing despots

and dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. These uprisings belied AQ's

longstanding assertion that such change could only occur through violent jihad against the

West and their Arab allies.[1] Then in May 2011, AQ suffered its most dramatic setback when

Usama bin Laden (UBL) was killed by U.S. special operations forces. With his death, AQ

lost its ideological champion, chief recruiter, and most ardent spokesman for its cause.[2]

UBL's death was soon followed by the targeted killing of other high-ranking AQ leaders, to

include the September 2011 death of U.S.-born terrorist Anwar Al-Awlaki by a suspected

CIA unmanned drone strike.[3] These momentous events gave rise to questions regarding

AQ's viability, as numerous commentators claimed UBL's death and the Arab Spring

represented the beginning of AQ's strategic defeat and eventual demise. Such

pronouncements seem premature, but how does one make such a determination?

The preferred lens by which a force determines whether its enemy has been affected

by their actions is through Center of Gravity (COG) analysis. The primary purpose of COG

analysis is to determine the enemy's key strength(s), and identify potential vulnerabilities in

those strengths that, when attacked or destroyed, renders the COG untenable and hastens the

defeat of the enemy.[4] Using this methodology, one can conclude AQ remains viable since

its operational center of gravity -- AQ's diffuse network of affiliate groups and individual

facilitators, collectively referred to as Al Qaeda and Associated Movements – has not been

significantly weakened by the death of UBL and the Arab Spring. The analysis not only

debunks premature notions of AQ's pending culmination, but makes it clear that AQ continues to exhibit both intent and capability to conduct terrorist operations despite the death of its leader and the repudiation of its ideology by the Arab Spring.

The Evolving Al Qaeda Threat

At the time of the 9/11 attack, AQ was a single organization formed around the nucleus of UBL and his Egyptian deputy, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, with UBL exercising almost complete control over the group's activities.[5] The estimated number of "Core" AQ members at the time of 9/11 was around 200 personnel, many with fighting experience from Afghanistan.[6] Subsequent U.S. counterterrorism (CT) efforts following 9/11 resulted in the elimination of numerous Core AQ members (an estimated 80% of Core AQ fighters were killed in the first two months of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM), forcing UBL and other surviving Core AQ members to relocate from their Afghanistan safe haven to Pakistan's northwest frontier known as the Federal Administered Tribal Area (FATA), where they continue to face attrition from U.S. and allied forces.[7] These persistent efforts hindered Core AQ's ability to train and conduct attacks on the magnitude of the 9/11 attacks, making it more reliant on other affiliate groups (especially in Pakistan) to conduct terror operations.[8] With their ability to conduct kinetic actions diminished, Core AQ instead shifted its emphasis to becoming the ideological leader of a worldwide Sunni Islamic insurgency, focused on inspiring the global Islamic militant community to continue jihad against the U.S. and its allies and maintaining the ideological purity of the movement.[9] Core AQ's ideological role remains a strategic threat to the U.S and is the group's strategic center of gravity, as it is the binding force between Core AQ and the groups and individuals it inspires.[10] The ideological

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ties between Core AQ and AQAM enable Core AQ to operate at the operational level of war through its affiliate network.[11]

Core AQ, primarily through UBL's efforts, successfully co-opted several regional Islamic militant groups to adopt its ideology and accept Core AQ strategic direction over the last decade.[12] In return, the affiliates gain instant recognition as an AQ organization, opening new revenue and manpower streams.[13] Core AQ maintains its strongest links with its geographic allies in Pakistan's FATA, to include the Pakistani Taliban and Haqqani Network; these relationships enable Core AQ to continue active resistance to U.S. and NATO operations in Afghanistan.[14] Outside Afghanistan and Pakistan, key AQ-affiliates such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, Al Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) in Algeria and North Africa, and Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) pledged *bayat* (allegiance), directly to bin Laden. Through its affiliate network, Core AQ exercise influence at the local level in regions far from the Core's assessed base in Pakistan, primarily through grassroots recruiting and attacks against government structures and institutions in their countries. AQAM enables Core AQ to conduct attacks against targets in the U.S. and the West; for instance, AQAP facilitated the 2009 Christmas Day attempt to down a U.S.-bound airliner using an underwear bomb. Moreover, Nidal Hassan, the alleged Fort Hood shooter, claimed his motivation for his attack stemmed from this relationship with al-Awalaki, AQAP's English-langauge jihadist.[15] These groups also provide a venue for training camps and facilitate the movement of potential Jihadists, including a growing number of Westerners, to these camps.

The use of Westerners inspired by AQ's ideology to conduct attacks in Europe and the U.S. further extends AQAM's operational reach. Westerners in particular are attractive

candidates for AQ recruitment since their passports are unlikely to draw attention from security forces and they can blend into their target society.[16] Core AQ uses operatives, referred to by some analysts as AQ's "middle managers," in Europe to serve as facilitators to identify and empower individuals (or small cells) to conduct local jihad on AQ's behalf.[17] These "middle managers" are experienced jihadists who maintain contacts with Core AQ leaders and provide critical links between Core AQ and its "foot-soldiers" in the West. The facilitators identify candidates for potential training camp attendance run by an AQ-affiliate group, and also aid in travel arrangements. Upon their return, the facilitator assists in attack planning, and can provide logistics and targeting support through arrangements with Core AQ. The facilitator can also assist in obtaining approval from Core AQ for attacks on Western targets which fit into AQ's targeting construct.   In many ways, the facilitator "professionalizes" the individual or cell to ensure their actions attain a standard suitable for an AQ-affiliated action.[18]

AQAM is Core AQ's primary means to continue its global insurgency despite suffering key personnel losses, to include UBL. AQAM enables Core AQ to remain relevant since AQAM draws its motivation from Core AQ's ideology. While its ideology remains the group's strategic Center of Gravity, AQAM is the AQ's strongest critical factor at the operational level and is AQ's operational Center of Gravity.

Deconstructing Al-Qaida's Operational Center of Gravity

According to U.S. Joint military doctrine, identification of the operational COG allows further deconstruction to identify its component levels, specifically its critical capabilities (CC), critical requirements (CR), and critical vulnerabilities (CV). Identification

of the critical vulnerabilities is the most vital aspect of COG analysis; knowing the CVs allows a force to concentrate superior power against them, prevent the COG from achieving its critical capability, and force the early culmination of the enemy.[19]

Critical Capabilities (CC). Critical capabilities are defined as the primary ability (or ability) exercised by the COG.[20] The most critical capability for AQAM is the ability to conduct terror operations to achieve its strategic objectives, which is comprised of the following:

1. Removal of U.S. and Western forces from the Arabian Peninsula (which contain Islam's holiest sites) and other Islamic lands;
2. Force the U.S. to cease support to regimes which oppress Muslims, to include repressive Muslim regimes;
3. Establishment of a Global Caliphate.[21]

Core AQ continues to emphasize the concept of global jihad as the primary means to accomplish its objectives. AQ's ideology extols jihad as every Muslim's duty to fight on behalf of Islam, and justifies attacks U.S. and Western targets, as well as on non-pious Muslims, for their perceived occupation and oppression of Muslim lands. This rhetoric has incited numerous attacks on Western targets both in and out of the Middle East, as well as attacks on Arab government officials and security forces seen as complicit with the West.[22]

Critical Requirements (CRs). CRs are conditions, resources, and means required for a center of gravity to achieve its critical capability.[23] AQAM's critical requirements include a public receptive to AQ's ideology, a prolific communications infrastructure, a secure logistics pipeline, and safe havens.

The most vital of these CRs is the ability for AQ's ideology to resonate amongst a receptive public audience, both in the Middle East and around the world. AQ must possess the capability to radicalize Muslims and compel them to join the movement or act on its behalf. Actions taken by the U.S. and the West also play in a critical role in this dynamic, as ongoing U.S. military action in Iraq and Afghanistan play to AQ's message of an ongoing war against Islam in its own lands. AQ especially seeks to incite Muslims in the West to spread its ideology and ultimately carry out operations intended to strategically weaken the U.S., thereby forcing its withdrawal from the Muslim world.[24] Muslim sympathizers may provide financial and other material support to AQAM or help in spreading AQ's message. Those who join the various groups or act on AQ's behalf provides AQAM the manpower to conduct the full range of operations required to conduct terrorism actions, from fundraising and intelligence gathering to conducting actual attacks. [25]

A prolific communications infrastructure is a critical requirement as it facilitates AQAM to both spread its message as well as coordinate operations. UBL's use of video messages as a both a means to inspire and influence targeting efforts across AQAM enabled Core AQ to transcend its earlier role as a singular Islamic terrorist group to become the vanguard of like-minded Islamic militants and organizations.[26] AQ's affiliate groups, in particular AQAP, have demonstrated similar media sophistication in its efforts to radicalize elements of the Muslim population around the world. In some cases, the affiliate groups have outpaced the parent organization with its media savvy; for instance, AQAP's online English-language jihadist magazine *Inspire* specifically targets Muslim living in the U.S. and the West and encourages them to conduct jihad in their home countries.[27] The release of *Inspire* coincided with AQAP's broadened targeting outlook outside Yemen and the Arabian

Peninsula, as the group had earlier claimed responsibility for the November 2009 Fort Hood attack and the December 2009 attempted Christmas Day bombing of a U.S. airliner.[28] Moreover, the use of English-language spokesman, particularly Adam Gadahan (Core AQ) and al-Awlaki (AQAP), to front AQ's ideology in Internet videos and other media messaging complements *Inspire*'s jihadist commentary and provides a relatable public face for Western-based sympathizers who may lack access to a live cleric.[29] Social media outlets like Facebook and other online forums provide avenues for "wanna-be" jihadists to virtually connect with other like-minded personalities and solidify ties to extremist groups.[30] Absence the passage of strict regulations controlling AQAM's access to cyberspace, the movement will likely continue to use Internet-based mass media as a means to spread its ideology and highlight perceive injustices carried out by the West. In the end, access to Islamic extremism will remain a Google search away.

Aside from the ability to organize and inspire, the tools of cyberspace also aid AQAM in conducting terrorist operations. The 9/11 hijackers use the Internet to research flight schools, select targets and communicate plans and intentions, while Hasan, the Fort Hood shooter, sought guidance from al-Awlaki via email prior to conducting the attack.[31] Likewise in 2004, email was used by UK-based extremists to contact Pakistan-based militants ensure they had the right proportion of materials for a fertilizer bomb (Middle Men).[32] Social media likewise simplifies the means for online collaboration beyond mere recruitment; the ability for real-time meetings via Skype and other applications provides AQAM the ability to plan operations face-to-face through video-teleconferencing. Moreover, as the Western world becomes more reliant on digital technology, opportunities grow for disruption via AQAM-inspired hackers.[33]

A robust logistics infrastructure is a critical requirement for AQAM operations and sustainment. The ability to acquire and move manpower, weapons, and funds across AQAM allows AQAM to act on the global stage. A critical task carried out by AQAM's "middle managers" in the West is their facilitation of "homegrown," Western-based terrorists. Once potential Western jihadists are identified, these "middle managers" use their connections to arrange travel to various AQAM training camps where they receive training on weapons and building lethal devices.[34]

Funding likewise follows a similar dynamic as recruiting manpower to AQ's cause. According to U.S. government estimates, the Arabian Peninsula is the most important source for financial support for AQAM.[35] Despite efforts to curtail and interdict the flow of money to terrorist entities, AQAM maintains funding streams outside the established global financial networks. The use of *hawalas* (traditional Arab money trading) and personal couriers to move illicit funds is still widely utilized.[36] Immature banking systems in developing countries offer opportunities for AQAM groups to hide money within a legitimate banking structure. AQAM groups have also branched out to more criminal means to obtain funding; AQIM's involvement in local drug smuggling and kidnap for ransom schemes are the most frequent examples. Finally, sympathizers continue to donate money to Islamic charitable organizations tied to AQAM elements.[37]

Safe havens are a critical requirement for AQAM as they provide the operational space to conduct recruitment and indoctrination, training, planning, and preparation for terrorist operations. For AQAM, these have generally manifested in areas which lack strong central governmental authority, to include Pakistan's FATA, Somalia, Yemen, and a large swath of North Africa known as the Sahel (stretching from Mauritania to Chad). These

areas are also typically poor and isolated, making the local populations susceptible to AQAM's ideology and subsequent recruitment.[38] Safe havens provide AQAM a measure of physical protection against external threats, as well as areas to establish training camps.[39] For AQAM facilitators located in the West, some mosques provide safe havens for AQ "preachers" who used them to target Muslims sympathetic to AQ's cause.[40] Moreover, safe havens no longer need to be a physical space – the largely unregulated nature of cyberspace allows for AQAM to conduct recruitment and indoctrination, and also provides the means to conduct rudimentary training from the comfort of one's home.[41]

Critical Vulnerabilities (CVs). While considered a source of strength, COGs still exhibit inherent vulnerabilities which, if exploited, can cause the COG to collapse.[42] AQAM CVs include a non-receptive public, differences between AQAM elements and physical attrition by CT forces. Exploitation of these vulnerabilities could cause serious discord within the internal structure of the movement and deny AQAM the operating space it needs to conduct operations.

The most important CV for AQAM's COGs (both strategic and operational) is the rejection of AQ's ideology by the global Muslim population. Ideology provides the link between AQAM and the population it aims to influence or control; more specifically, public acceptance of AQ's ideology in various parts of the worldwide Islamic community enables AQAM to exist as a global insurgency.[43] Recent scholarship reveals divergent trends with regard to the resonance shown by the Muslim population towards acceptance of AQAM's message. Polling data suggests while a majority of Muslims strongly disagree with AQAM's targeting practices (which have killed mostly Muslims), they also view AQAM's ideology as addressing key Muslim grievances against the West, in particular ongoing U.S. military

operations in the Middle East. Consequently, this continued Muslim angst over perceived

Western "crusades" in the Middle East contributed to the expansion of AQAM over the last

half-decade. [44] The ability for AQAM to localize AQ's ideology for use at the operational

level demonstrates the adaptability of AQ's message as a means to tap into local grievances.

Severing this link between the local population and the ideology becomes the paramount

operational goal in a counter-insurgency campaign. As noted by Colonel David M. Witty,

USA, this link should be attacked through the decisive point of *consanguinity,* the affinity

between AQ's ideology and the local insurgents and population, with the goal disconnecting

the population from the ideology. While the local insurgency still exists, it does not feed into

AQAM's global insurgency, possibly eliminating a key vector sustaining the local

insurgency and setting the conditions for culmination. [45]

Another key CV for AQAM is the possible fracturing of the movement through

dissonance between its elements. While Core AQ remains the strategic center of the

movement, its perceived inability to conduct kinetic operations similar to 9/11 without help

from its associated groups could render Core AQ impotent over time.[46] AQI and AQAP

overshadowed Core AQ at times, leading to debates within the organization over operational

control. In 2005, the deliberate targeting of both Shia and Sunni Muslims in Iraq under the

direction of AQI's Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi resulted in contention between Zarqawi and AQ

Core, leading to AQ Core's admonishment of Zarqawi and direction for AQI to cease its

targeting practice. When Zarqawi refused, AQ Core directed jihadis away from Iraq.[47] More

recently, AQAP emerged as a potential challenger to AQ Core's leadership role; the group's

role in recent plots against the U.S. homeland enhanced its worldwide image, leading some

government officials and terrorist analysts to contend AQAP poses a greater threat to the U.S. than Core AQ.[48]

Exacerbating Core AQ's leadership challenge from its component levels is the ongoing decimation of its key personnel through U.S. attrition efforts. In addition to UBL, Core AQ also suffered the following key losses in 2011:

1. Ilyas Kashmiri, Core AQ's primary conduit to TTP, was killed by a drone strike on 4 June;

2. Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, considered al Qaeda's top operational planner, was killed 22 August by a drone strike;

3. Abu Hafs al-Shihri, believed to be another Core AQ's operational planner, was killed by a drone strike in September 2011.[49]

These losses negatively impacted Core AQ's command and control over AQAM elements, and further disrupted Core AQ's ability to conduct kinetic actions on their own. Furthermore, the deaths of UBL and his key lieutenants provide opportunities for challengers to emerge from AQAM's lower ranks and lead to factional infighting.[50]

The Effect of UBL's death and Arab Spring on AQ's Operational COG

Having established an analytic framework which deconstructs AQ's operational COG to its component strengths and vulnerabilities, one can now examine the dual shocks of UBL's death and Arab Spring within a proper context. UBL's death provides the starkest example yet of AQ's vulnerability to ongoing counterterrorism efforts. Likewise, the dynamics which ushered in the Arab Spring offers both opportunities to seriously undermine or enhance the acceptance AQ's ideology amongst the Arab populace.

The Death of UBL. Debates over UBL's leadership role within AQAM continues to be hotly contested, even after his death. A number of analysts argued U.S. CT efforts relegated UBL to figurehead status within the organization, content on giving his affiliates autonomy to conduct operations which fit within AQ's ideology and allowing second-tier AQ figures run day-to-day operational matters.[51] Even so, UBL possessed the capability to provide strategic targeting guidance to his affiliates through his video messaging.[52] Others contend UBL was highly involved in operational level planning and was in communications with his operational level leaders up to his death, a view supported by documents recovered during the raid on his Abbottabad compound. These officials and analysts suggest his death will have a profound impact on the entire organization since his loss eliminates the one leader who could provide unquestioned strategic goals for the global jihadi movement. Without UBL, AQAM is on an irreversible downward trend which will result in its strategic defeat.[53]

UBL's death, while clearly a psychological blow to AQAM, does not greatly affect it at the operational level since the movement already demonstrated a measure of freedom to conduct operations within AQ's ideological framework.[54] UBL's lasting legacy is his development of a diffuse and resilient network of like-minded fighters tied to AQ's religious-based ideology; the pervasiveness of the ideology makes AQAM more resistant to decapitation efforts such as the one which killed UBL.[55] The decentralized nature of AQAM also insulates the movement from attacks on Core AQ; as groups like AQAP have operated independently from Core AQ over the past several years, they have developed organizational structures at their own operational level which enable the affiliate to withstand blows against Core AQ.[56] Moreover, whereas before AQAM elements consulted UBL in the past on

operational matters due to personal allegiance to him, these affiliates could now bypass surviving Core AQ leadership and conduct attacks which fit within AQ's larger agenda.[57] Finally, UBL's demise elevates him to the status of a martyr for AQ's cause; AQAM could use his life story and his death at the hands of "infidels" as an example for future jihadis to emulate.[58]

The Arab Spring. The effect of Arab Spring on AQ's operational COG may take years to manifest, as countries affected by the protest movements continue to transition to new governments; however, there is general consensus amongst terrorism analysts that the Arab Spring represented a direct assault on AQ's ideology. The uprisings which swept through Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere in the Middle East were largely secular, non-violent movements which repudiated AQ's assertion that claimed change could only come from violent jihad against the U.S. and their apostate allies.[59] Instead of railing against a perceived U.S. military occupation of Islamic holy lands, the Arab Spring protestors clamored for more jobs, better governance, and the elimination of corruption.[60] Recognizing the potential deleterious effect the Arab Spring could have on the relevance of its ideology, AQAM attempted to tie Arab Spring themes to its ideology as a way to spin the uprisings as a victory for its brand. For instance, recent AQAM messaging shows a clear attempt to portray the Arab Spring movements as a rejection of U.S. involvement in the region, while imploring the new revolutionary governments to adopt Sharia law and avoid further engagement with Western nations.[61] Additional AQAM messaging also suggested that the non-violent path was subsumed by open conflict between the government and the population in both Libya and Syria, thus validating the concept of jihad as a means to enact sweeping change.[62]

Where the Arab Spring could have more impact on AQAM is not necessarily in the change which has already occurred, but in the change still yet to come. Questions still loom over whether the democratic momentum brought forth by the Arab Spring can carry through the transition between interim revolutionary governments and more stable and permanent institutions. If the follow-on governments fail to quickly deliver on promised change or begin to resemble the pre-Arab Spring governments they overthrew, they run the risk of pushing disaffected constituents over to AQAM elements. Such a shift will likely be used by AQAM to discredit the democratic gains made under the Arab Spring and reinforce AQ's ideology while poisoning the prospects for future democratic change in the region. [63]

Implications – Attacking AQ's Operational COG through its Critical Vulnerabilities

It would be incorrect to assume UBL's death and Arab Spring signals the end of the AQ and its movement. While their leader is dead, his forces remain on the field, and it is unlikely they will lay down their arms in the foreseeable future. The ideology championed by UBL, while diminished by his death and the Arab Spring, still resonates in parts of the Muslim world and continues to attract new adherents in the Middle East, Africa, and, most importantly for AQAM, the West. However, these events provide potential themes which operational commanders can leverage to attack AQ's operational COG along its critical vulnerabilities -- primarily by separating local populations from AQ's ideology and attrition of AQAM leadership – which can provide more enduring effects on the insurgency movement.

Above all, operational commanders should focus on attacking AQ's ideology within their respective areas of responsibility as a way to block and rollback the spread of AQAM

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elements. A critical enabler for AQAM's growth over the last decade is its ability to apply

its ideology to disaffected populations engaged in conflicts with their own governments or

other external actors. By conflating a local population's grievances with AQ's ideology, AQ

gained adherents in Iraq, Somalia, and elsewhere which allowed Core AQ to branch out and

diversify into affiliate groups. A paramount task at the operational level should be to

discredit AQ's ideology at the local, grassroots level where AQ seeks to influence a targeted

population. Buttressing the local population's immunity to AQ's toxic narrative prevents AQ

from using the population to expand its operational reach and deny AQAM safe havens.[64]

Operational commanders can leverage themes from the Arab Spring to diminish AQ's

ideology within their AORs. The Arab Spring represents an existential threat to AQ's

ideology since it offers a proven alternative to AQAM's violent, religious-based approach for

oppressed Arab populations seeking to enact state-level change. Secondly, Arab Spring

protestors called for greater democratic and individual rights within their own countries,

instead of the wholesale implementation of strict and archaic *sharia* laws as envisioned by

AQ. Finally, the mass protests were largely spurred by Muslims youths – the very

demographic AQ seeks to influence and employ in its insurgency. Collectively, these themes

can be used in information operations messaging to discredit AQ's narrative and offers a

clear alternative for local populations to address perceived injustices without seeking

assistance from AQAM.[65]

In conjunction with Arab Spring messaging, the U.S. must continue to improve host

nation governance and security practices to reduce the underlying causes of internal strife

and neutralize the appeal of AQ's ideology. As AQ exploits ongoing conflicts between

populations and their governments to gain operating space and recruits, ensuring local or

regional governments can eliminate the sources discord with its aggrieved populations becomes critical. A population which considers their government as responsive to their needs or is non-oppressive is less likely to seek outside influences such as AQ as a means to rectify local problems.[66] Operational commanders, through theater security programs, should offer frank assessments of poor host nation governance and security practices which exacerbates seams between governments and their populations which provide AQAMs opportunities to exploit the resulting discord.

Where the Arab Spring has resulted in a change of government leadership, the U.S. must tread carefully and pursues policies which both fosters the development of nascent democratic institutions and prevents AQ from using the intervening transition period to gain footholds in the affected countries. Concerns over the potential for Islamic-orientated parties assuming key leadership roles in future governments must be balanced with respect for the outcome of upcoming elections. The U.S. must be prepared to work with Islamic political groups like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt which are historically outspoken in their opposition of the U.S. role in the Middle East. Nonetheless, the U.S. must adapt to changing political landscapes in these countries in order to sustain democratic movements in the Middle East, which continue to undermine AQ's assertion suggesting democracy is not compatible with Islam.[67] If the promise that the Arab Spring held fails to materialize, the result could swell AQAM's ranks and validate violent jihad as the only means to enact change in the region.

While countering AQ's ideology remains the top priority, physical attrition – capturing or killing AQAM leadership elements -- should continue to play a central role in future counterterrorism strategies.[68] The expanding nature of AQAM requires the geographic

broadening of CT efforts to target key AQAM elements outside Afghanistan and Pakistan. Similar actions against AQAM's operational leaders in Yemen, Somalia, North Africa and the West can disrupt operational efforts which sustain AQAM elements and allow them to conduct terrorist actions.[69] Kinetic actions against AQAM leadership elements could also inhibit the emergence of a new leader which could potentially assume UBL's role in the greater organization. The killing of AQAP's al-Awalki provides a good example of this dynamic; until his death in September 2011, al-Awalaki was considered a rising star within AQAM due to his ability to incite English-speaking jihadis to conduct attacks in the West.[70]

However, expanding the U.S. CT role in these countries risks playing into AQ's ideology, which paints U.S. policy as a war against Islam.[71] Just in 2011 alone, UBL's killing, ongoing drone operations and other incidents in Pakistan involving U.S. forces contributed to a significant downturn in relations with the Pakistani government and increased negative popular perceptions of U.S. policy in Pakistan.[72] In planning future CT efforts, operational leaders should carefully consider the level of U.S. involvement in kinetic operations so as not to further perpetuate false notions of a U.S. "crusade" against Islam. Moreover, the U.S. should seek to build up host nation CT capabilities through operational-level theater security engagements so future CT operations carried out by those countries maintain a domestic (vice U.S.) face and limit direct U.S. involvement in CT actions.[73] A key component of such engagement should focus on ensuring intelligence-sharing protocols enable host nation security or military forces to conduct operations on actionable intelligence. Most importantly, operational commanders will need to balance kinetic CT operations with complementary strategic communication efforts designed to counter AQ's assertion that the U.S. is at war with Islam.

Conclusions

Despite predictions of a quick demise following UBL's death and the Arab Spring, AQ will likely remain the U.S.'s primary terrorist threat for the foreseeable future. AQ's evolution from a single jihadist organization to a geographically diffuse network, linked by a common violent ideology, enables AQ to endure years of persistent counterterrorism actions while sustaining its ability to conduct attacks against U.S. and Western targets. AQAM represents AQ's operational center of gravity, through which AQ is able to conduct actions which spread AQ's ideology and provides an outlet for disaffected Muslims to conduct jihad against perceived injustices conducted by the U.S. and its allies. For AQAM to operate successfully, it must draw on continued support from a receptive public, maintain uninhibited communications and logistics pipelines, and ensure access to safe havens. It must also protect itself from its critical vulnerabilities, to include its ideology losing resonance amongst the Muslim population, limiting internal discord within the organization, and protecting its command and control elements from physical attrition from CT forces.

UBL's death and the Arab Spring represent events which attack AQAM along these vulnerabilities, but do not go far enough to fully neutralize AQ's operational COG.[74] Killing UBL removed AQAM 's ideological champion, and his death was a deep psychological blow to his adherents. His elimination may hasten internal battles within the organization as new individuals emerge to take UBL's place as leader of AQ's global insurgency. Likewise, the promise of the Arab Spring uprisings has the potential to permanently discredit AQ's violent ideology and offer hope in a beleaguered region. However, the terror affiliates UBL helped foster in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and elsewhere remain active and deadly, while his ideology continues to inspire individuals in the West to conduct jihad in their own backyards.

Despite the optimism shown by some U.S. CT officials and analysts, it is unlikely AQAM will concede defeat in the near future. UBL's death elevated his stature amongst his fellow jihadis as the ultimate martyr, worthy of emulation by future extremists which could sustain AQAM for years to come. Meanwhile, AQAM elements could use any disillusionment stemming from post-Arab Spring governance issues to paint the uprisings as a failure and point to their ideology as the only true path to change.

However, the momentous events of 2011 provide insights on how attacking both AQ's ideology and its key leadership across the AQAM spectrum could yield significant gains against the entire AQ network. The U.S., at both the strategic and operational levels of engagement, should promote actions which foster the democratic gains made under the Arab Spring and ensures the establishment of governments responsible to their people and neutralizes AQ's ability to apply its ideology. Moreover, while the U.S. continues to degrade Core AQ elements in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the U.S. should also expand efforts eliminate AQAM elements to further disrupt and degrade their capabilities in other regions as well. This can be accomplished through theater security cooperation programs designed to improve intelligence sharing and host nation CT capabilities to reduce the U.S. operational footprint while encouraging these nations to neutralize AQAM leaders and safe havens in their countries. By increasing the pressure across AQAM's vulnerabilities, its ability to conduct operations supporting its critical capability can be significantly diminished.

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