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"The Arab Awakening: Implications for Al Qaeda and the Future of Terrorism"

Woodrow Wilson Center

1300 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, D.C., 20004

Thursday, May 10, 2012, 9:00am-11:00pm

On Thursday, the Woodrow Wilson Center hosted an event exploring whether the Arab Awakening has marginalized al-Qaeda or has presented opportunities. The speakers included **Jon Alterman**, the Director at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, **Barak Barfi**, a research fellow at the New America Foundation, **Daniel Byman**, a professor at Georgetown, and **Daveed Gartenstein-Ross**, a fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. **Bruce Hoffman**, director for the Center for Peace and Security Studies and Security Studies Program at Georgetown University, moderated.

Bruce Hoffman opened, saying that the desire of the event was to collect a group of panelist to examine the darker side of the Arab Spring – those who are violently inclined – something which he feels has received very little attention.

Jon Alterman explained that the main threat of al-Qaeda was the potential of the movement to shift from the fringe to a recognized mainstream organization. Alterman extrapolated three reasons why al-Qaeda was able to build upon a broad sense of dissatisfaction, even though they failed to gain legitimacy and enter the mainstream. By not being able to explain, or excuse, the killings of Muslims, al-Qaeda alienated themselves from a majority of the Islamic world; the proto-states of Iraq and Afghanistan did not prove to be desirable places for people to live; and the international community taking a strong stance against the organization. With each state focusing their intelligence and law enforcement communities on the organization, sanctuaries shriveled to nothing, but the biggest defeat for al-Qaeda was the Islamic clergy applying jurisprudence to delegitimize their religious authority. **Alterman called the crisis in Syria an excellent opportunity for al-Qaeda to grow, but the possible insurgence of jihadist activity within the country could be used as a tool to motivate intervention from Russia and China.** Additionally, Alterman believes the new Islamic parties of the post-Arab Spring are large bore organizations, which allows them to reach the population through institutional activity and indicates their success transitioning from the post-modern to the modern – something which al-Qaeda has not been able to accomplish previously.

Barak Barfi indicated the disposition of the youth that filled al-Qaeda's ranks has changed from those willing to die for a belief to those more likely to focus on building a new society. **The current optimism post Arab Spring harks back to Nasserism, but Barfi believes the pessimism that permeated the political process will return, and when it does al-Qaeda will be able to capitalize of the dissatisfaction.** One possible talking point for al-Qaeda could be criticizing the countries that do not incorporate Islamic law into their constitutions and citing the lack of Islamic law when countries experience difficulties.

Daniel Byman commented on al-Qaeda's marginalization in the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring fed off optimism and al-Qaeda's negative message did not mesh with the ebullient atmosphere. While the death of **Osama bin Laden** was a blow to the base, the release of multiple prisoners allows for the possibility of an individual to exponentially stimulate the movement. As the newly formed democratic countries allow greater freedoms within civil society, the relaxation of expression and speech restrictions could provide an opening to lay the ground work for extremism. Another facet that could allow al-Qaeda to metastasize is in pre-revolutionary countries that have shifted their emphasis from counter-terrorism to containing popular protests. **Byman theorized that if Salafist parties make legitimate gains in the political process, but are denied as political actors, then a radicalization and violence may ensue.** While the core of al-Qaeda remains small and has had a difficult time controlling its affiliates, the troubling trend is that affiliates are falling more in line with the core. This could be considered a success of bin Laden, as he sought a unified movement based on core values. **Byman concluded that while working to "crush" the affiliates, the West should remain cognizant that regional stifling of al-Qaeda could motivate them to operate globally.**

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross continued, saying that trying to understand the Arab Spring without the context of al-Qaeda's goals could result in grave consequences. After examining 100 statements of leading Salafist religious leaders over the past year, Gartenstein-Ross believes pan-Islamism is the consistent theme, and it paints America as a bad ally and weak. **There have been multiple small victories for al-Qaeda since the Arab Spring, including the release of multiple influential figures, jihadi groups gaining additional territorial control, and increased mobility due to the destabilization of centralized authority.**

Bruce Hoffman followed the panelist discussion by asking them their reaction to al-Qaeda exploiting sectarianism. Byman said they could exploit the tension, but the core as well as bin Laden's vision, revolve around supporting the overall movement. Barafi echoed the hesitancy of the core to use an issue which may cause a polarization. A backlash could result, causing nationalistic tendencies to trump the Islamic identity.

During the question and answer session, Barafi responded to how President **Barack Obama's** democracy efforts are perceived by using Libya and Egypt as examples. As Libya has no democratic experience, any outside attention is greeted positively, but in Egypt, a country that has established institutions, nationalism encourages progress. **Gartenstein-Ross reiterated that bad governance in the newly democratic states would allow al-Qaeda the opportunity to say they are not Islamic enough, and Alterman asserted that al-Qaeda could criticize the new establishments, but would run the risk of ostracizing itself as it would run counter to the Islamic mindset of "obey the ruler even if unjust."** Byman said the implication of a post-Mubarak Sinai Peninsula could escalate the violence between Israel and Egypt, since new Egyptian politicians will be less averse to violence and Israel no longer feels they have a friend in Egypt. Alterman laid out a scenario where the flow of weapons from Libya to this region could exacerbate the regional tension.

Hoffman asked all the panelists where they believe the al-Qaeda movement will be in 10 years. **Alterman suggested al-Qaeda will be able to transform to a post-modern movement, and in turn become a theoretical set of ideas.** Byman said the future will depend on if they are given a cause where other can rally around. Global trends are what Gartenstein-Ross feels will be the determining factor for the organization. **As nation states weaken, such as Yemen and Somalia, non-state actors will be able to carve out sanctuaries.** With no leader with widespread name recognition, Baraki said the movement is now on the shoulders of the al-Qaeda affiliates.