

# BULLETIN

No. 26 (243) • March 10, 2011 • © PISM

Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief), Agnieszka Kopeć (Executive Editor),  
Łukasz Adamski, Beata Górka-Winter, Artur Gradziuk, Leszek Jesień,  
Beata Wojna, Ernest Wyciszkievicz

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## Al Qaeda and the Revolutions in the Arab World

Kacper Rękawek

*Al Qaeda did not inspire or instigate the civil unrest that has engulfed Northern Africa and the Middle East. The organization failed to create viable structures in the region and seems unable to influence the course of events. Nonetheless, the political destabilization of the Arab world might allow Al Qaeda to establish a bridgehead in the immediate vicinity of Europe. This should prompt the European Union to assist democratization processes in Arab states.*

**History of Al Qaeda.** Al Qaeda was created in 1988 by Arab veterans of the Afghan war who supported the mujahedin in their struggle against the Soviets after the invasion of 1979. Osama bin Laden, a sponsor of Arab volunteers in Afghanistan, became the organisation's leader and paymaster. Al Qaeda is a jihadist organization that stands for the removal of non-Islamic influences from the Muslim world and the establishment of an Islamic caliphate to unite all Muslims under a single ruling system. Throughout the years, Al Qaeda's ideology evolved from a concept of a defensive jihad to assist "invaded" Muslim countries such as Afghanistan to opposition to secularized Arab states (the so-called "near enemy"), and later concentrated on declaring war on the United States and Israel (the so-called "far enemy") whose support allegedly ensures the survival of the Middle East's unpopular and un-Islamic autocracies.

**Al Qaeda as a "Global Brand."** From the mid-1990s onwards, Al Qaeda attempted to create a wide coalition of Arab jihadist organizations. Al Qaeda's anti-western, anti-American and anti-Israeli platform was to act as the unifying bond of this coalition. Such an alliance was to give the appearance that bin Laden's organization, which numbered fewer than 500 men conducting operations from within Afghanistan and the border area with Pakistan, was omnipresent.

Al Qaeda never managed to establish a "jihadist international" because its perceived allies' were unwilling to act against and attract the attention of the United States and other Western powers, instead concentrating on battling the autocratic regimes of the Arab world. This setback did not stop Al Qaeda from launching a terrorist campaign against the "far enemy," which brought it both massive though short-lived popularity and recognition in the Muslim world and criticism from the likes of Egypt's Islamic Group and Islamic Jihad and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. Only factions of these organizations decided to join or merge with Al Qaeda under leader Ayman al Zawahiri of Islamic Jihad, who was a bin Laden deputy and Al Qaeda's main ideologue in 2000.

The global jihad's relative unpopularity in the Muslim world forced Al Qaeda to rely on the most radical elements of the already existing jihadist groups or centrally and newly created structures to stage spectacular terrorist attacks in the name of bin Laden's organization (Djerba and Bali in 2002, and Casablanca in 2003). Al Qaeda's weakness in the aftermath of losing its base in Afghanistan was further underscored by its inability to establish its regional branches in countries where the idea of the anti-American global jihad theoretically should have been appealing, e.g., civil war-torn Iraq or Algeria. Consequently, Al Qaeda was forced to settle for mergers with already established organizations such as Monotheism and Jihad in Iraq (known since 2004 as Al Qaeda in Iraq) or the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat in Algeria (from 2007, known as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) whose ideological foundations and tactics often failed to complement bin Laden's ideas and goals. This is especially true in relation to Al Qaeda in Iraq which became infamous because of its indiscriminate targeting of Iraqi civilians through numerous suicide bombings. The group's image also tainted bin Laden's Al Qaeda, which succeeded in establishing a fully-fledged branch only on one

occasion when some of the Saudi Arabian veterans of the Afghan jihad attempted to topple the monarchy in their country between 2003 and 2005.

**Al Qaeda and the “Arab Spring.”** According to Al Qaeda, armed struggle is the only tool that can spark political change in the Arab world. However, the Egyptian and Tunisian events in the beginning of this year seriously contradicted the pillars of this theory as leaders in those countries were forced to resign because of mass civil unrest. Such a course of events surprised Al Qaeda, which most probably has no assets in Northern Africa apart from the affiliated Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which is focused on the Sahara and Sahel region and seems to be either disinterested or unable to stage spectacular terrorist attacks on seaside population centres in the region.

During the early stages of the “Arab Spring,” Al Qaeda and its followers attempted to reshape the organisation’s image and reposition its ideology in the new political conditions of the Arab world. Jihadist websites and forums were filled with calls to recreate the moribund structures of organizations such as the Islamic Group and Islamic Jihad, which lost their significance after Arab governments adopted repressive counterterrorist policies while also expressing a readiness to socially reintegrate jihadists in exchange for denunciations of violence. This process recently continued in Libya, which in the last year released 360 members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group from prison, including the mid-February 2011 releases occurring just before the start of the Libyan uprising.

Al Qaeda-affiliated groups from Algeria and Iraq and also the reformed Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula issued statements that called on the protesters to arm themselves and continue the struggle until Sharia law was introduced in Northern Africa. It is hard to believe that such demands impressed the target audience whose demands for political and socio-economic change are not compatible with Al Qaeda’s calls for jihad.<sup>1</sup>

Al Qaeda’s standing also has not been improved by the recent comments of al Zawahiri, its Egyptian deputy commander, who released his long-awaited audiotape almost a month after the escalation of protests in his country. This suggests mounting logistical difficulties for Al Qaeda, which is no longer capable of the rapid production and distribution of professionally edited and multi-lingual videos, its past trademark. It seems that Al Qaeda might have been forced into an even deeper conspiracy by recent American counterterrorist measures on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. This turn of events only strengthens the organization’s alienation from its potential support base.

**Conclusions.** The fall of some of the Arab autocratic regimes because of mass civil unrest and protests is a serious blow to Al Qaeda. However, the region’s political situation is far from stable and local jihadists, including the factions that aligned themselves with Al Qaeda previously, might attempt to use that development to their advantage. The decomposition of the local security apparatus is also beneficial to Al Qaeda since many of the jihadists were released or managed to escape from prisons and are probably no longer closely monitored by the local security services. These individuals might act as the organisation’s bridgehead in Northern Africa, a region immediately neighbouring Europe. In response, Member States of the European Union and the United States should continue or re-establish cooperation with Arab security apparatus and support local democratization initiatives that could in the long-term undermine the social outreach of the jihadists.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Sasnal, *Libyan Crisis and International Community’s Reaction*, “Bulletin” PISM, no. 20 (237) of 23 February 2011.