

HSPI Commentary Series

TUMULT IN THE MIDDLE EAST: WHEN AND WHERE WILL THE NEXT SHOE DROP?

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Frank J. Cilluffo and Sharon L. Cardash

As change rings through the Arab world, there is a sense of freedom and uncertainty in the air. So many fundamental questions about the future of counterterrorism initiatives, approaches and relationships in the short, and medium to long terms, remain open as Egyptians and others contemplate next steps for their countries.

From a U.S. perspective, one of the most critical unresolved questions in the short run is what will become of cooperative bilateral counterterrorism partnerships, not only with Egypt, but also with Yemen, Jordan, Tunisia, Bahrain and Algeria. The U.S. relationship with each has varied and has been far from perfect, more so in certain instances than others. Yet the United States has to some extent relied on each to maintain critical intelligence coverage of the region.



"Many protesters raised their shoes as a sign of disrespect towards their beleaguered president" | BBC News

None of these countries has escaped the tumult of recent weeks, and although no two cases are exactly alike, their various publics have made clear that a mere rearrangement of the deck chairs will not do. Witness Jordan, where King Abdullah dismissed the Cabinet wholesale. Important implications for our liaison services hinge on the unknown fallout of such changes.

In the mid to long term, key issues of concern that remain open and pertain to our counterterrorism posture and relationships in the region, include the reliability and integrity of potential successor leadership figures, and their resolve and commitment to tackling and ultimately defeating jihadi-based terrorism. As political changes afford new personnel new responsibilities,



these figures will face a steep learning curve, compounded by structural changes in the counterterrorism apparatus itself.

At the same time, as U.S. eyes and ears are rightfully focused on Egypt and its surrounding neighborhood, wondering how the future will unfold and focusing on spillover effects, there exists a possibility for diversion of America's attention and finite resources. Others may see this as an opportunity to exploit.

Bear in mind that events in Egypt were no win for the jihadis – at least not thus far. To the contrary, recent events represent a repudiation of al Qaeda's violent ideology and a victory for the forces of democracy. Indeed, the mostly peaceful protesters in Tahrir Square were able to accomplish in a matter of days what the jihadis had been unsuccessfully planning and plotting for a number of years. Ironically, the jihadis' primary argument had been a call to jihad saying that the toppling of Mubarak and other "apostate" regimes could only be achieved by acts of terrorism and violence.

In the short run, the jihadis appear destined to take a backseat to democratic forces that crystallized spontaneously, as well as to the better organized Islamists, whose discipline and tactics set them apart from the jihadis. This may leave jihadis feeling threatened, wanting and needing a win in order to demonstrate their continuing relevance and power. The jihadis were, notably, just as taken aback as the U.S. was by the scope and pace of events in the region.

Al Qaeda's senior leadership (AQSL) or other aspiring jihadis may well have come to conclude that a successful attack on the so-called far enemy, the United States and its Western allies, while distracted, would not only exploit the chaos overseas but offer a path to re-establishing and reasserting the jihadis' own grip in the Arab world. The danger is that the jihadis will redouble their focus and efforts to strike the United States and Europe just as the U.S. and its Western allies are shifting their own gaze and substantial resources to Egypt and beyond. This end-state is not pre-determined though, especially if we take heed not to create a blind spot at home inadvertently.

Thus, as Egypt and the larger region may be entering a unique window of vulnerability, the same might also be said of America—and jihadis abroad too—though each for different reasons.

So what can, and should, we do? The answer is definitely not to retreat and retrench from events abroad. U.S. policymakers and practitioners must devote additional scarce collection resources and must allocate significant time and assets to analysis that will help frame upcoming decisions and actions in the Middle East and North Africa.

Last week, Congress took the intelligence community to task for its seemingly underwhelming performance on the Egyptian file. The claim is that our intelligence officials should have seen the wave of change of coming when it did. Without getting into the debate about whether it is fair to expect our analysts and operators to accurately predict not just "the what" but "the when," it is

clear that the intelligence business has evolved significantly. The pace of change, enabled by technology distributed ever more widely, grows ever faster. Can one SMS text change the world? Perhaps not, but as technology continues to spread and improve, it is increasingly possible to mobilize and galvanize people quickly and powerfully around a cause.

Even in Egypt, all those affected by the swirling change—or even all those initiating it—may not have understood and appreciated at the time the full import of those developments. The pace will likely only pick up in future, leaving the U.S. intelligence community to face considerable challenges in an environment where small numbers can have a disproportionately huge impact.

This disadvantage is magnified by the persistence and patience of our adversaries. Consider their recent tactical successes in the form of prison breaks in Egypt and Tunisia. These resulted in the liberation of hardcore terrorists (as well as political prisoners)—hardly a trivial outcome.

At the strategic level though, jihadis are experiencing a moment of vulnerability that could spur them to rear their heads. A concomitant window of opportunity exists for us. Now is the time to redouble and escalate our own efforts against them, by ramping up the counterterrorism pressure and other means in our arsenal, to hit them hard while they are already off balance.

What happens next in Egypt and the region is anyone's guess. In Egypt in particular, the lack of well-defined civilian leadership among the onetime-opposition forces, the absence of deep-rooted and empowered democratic institutions, and the void in terms of robust political parties, has led some to conclude that circumstances may be ripe for jihadist forces to strike and seize control. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the number two man in the ranks of AQSL, and an Egyptian and former leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, has himself said as much in an attempt to rouse al Qaeda affiliates and supporters in the region.

It seems safe to say that both U.S. and jihadi eyes will be watching closely to monitor developments in-country and gauge possible spillover effects. Nature abhors a vacuum, and there is no shortage of actors interested in filling those power gaps that may manifest in the region in weeks ahead. When and where the next shoe will drop—or be raised in protest—remains to be seen. In meantime, U.S. officials at home and abroad would be well-advised to think creatively about where the next blind spot may be—and to illuminate and further exploit those of the jihadis as well.

Frank J. Cilluffo is Director of The George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI). **Sharon L. Cardash** is Associate Director of HSPI.

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