



COMMENTARY/COMMENTAIRE

Halting al Qaeda's African Rebound

Why Supporting the Arab Spring and Exploiting bin Laden's Death will keep Canadians Safer

by Alex Wilner

Executive Summary

Little doubt exists that al Qaeda currently faces two unprecedented challenges: the “Arab Spring” sweeping the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and the death of Osama bin Laden in May 2011. Al Qaeda’s violent narrative has come under immense pressure after the toppling of Arab regimes by largely secular and peaceful protest movements, while the removal of bin Laden has robbed the organization of a charismatic and unifying figure. Yet for al Qaeda’s most prominent African affiliates — al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Somalia’s al Shabaab — the political upheaval sweeping the MENA region creates opportunities for growth. And while the elimination of al Qaeda’s founding leader will certainly hurt, his exit is unlikely to greatly influence AQIM’s or al Shabaab’s aspirations, tactics, or strategies. This article offers a critical overview of the costs and opportunities to al Qaeda’s African allies as a result of the Arab Spring and bin Laden’s death. Contrary to popular belief, al Qaeda’s affiliates may be on the mend and on the march. If Canada wants to stall al Qaeda’s regional rebound, it will have to work with its friends and allies to build on recent counterterrorism successes and keep al Qaeda on the run. And by consolidating democratic gains in the MENA region, Canadians will help ensure that al Qaeda’s regional appeal remains negligible.

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Publication date: November 2011

Introduction

In January 2011, long-simmering political, economic, and social discontent in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) boiled over.¹ Individual acts of desperation — including self-immolations — turned into street demonstrations and collective protest, which rapidly evolved into widespread (and for the most part non-violent) dissident movements. Few regional governments — and fewer Western governments — correctly anticipated what was to follow. To date, the resulting “Arab Spring” has toppled three dictatorial regimes (Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya) mortally wounded two more (Syria and Yemen), and shaken the political *status quo* in several other countries (notably Bahrain, Jordan, Oman, and Saudi Arabia). In Tunisia and Egypt, unprecedented political change is taking place. Tunisians went to the polls to elect a Constituent Assembly in October 2011 and Egyptians are due to hold free and open parliamentary elections in November 2011 and presidential elections in Spring 2012. In Libya, a NATO-led and UN-mandated offensive helped an anti-regime rebel alliance wrest control of the country from Colonel Muammar Gaddafi’s forces. The National Transitional Council of Libya is currently consolidating its gains and preparing for a democratic transition. And in Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain, *status quo* powers have used fear, imprisonment, and deadly military force in the hope of regaining control over their increasingly restless citizens. While these battles are ongoing as of November 2011 and political uncertainty hangs in the air, little doubt remains that unparalleled shifts in political power are taking place in the Arab and wider Muslim world.

And then came the death of Osama bin Laden on May 2, 2011. The al Qaeda leader was killed in a dramatic and daring covert operation carried out by US Special Operations Forces in Abbottabad, Pakistan, a small city roughly 70 kilometers north of Islamabad. Just after midnight local time, two dozen members of the United States Naval Special Warfare Development Group (popularly known as SEAL Team Six) dropped into bin Laden’s compound from specially designed stealth helicopters. In a systematic search of the compound’s various buildings, the team engaged with members of bin Laden’s small entourage, killing him, one of his sons, two trusted operatives, and one woman. The SEAL team retrieved bin Laden’s body (which was later buried at sea after it was biometrically and genetically identified) and collected a trove of data stashed in diaries, on hard drives, and on some 100 digital storage devices. In an operation that lasted just 40 minutes, the United States finally kept its decade-long promise to locate, track, and kill or capture the reclusive al Qaeda leader responsible for the death of nearly 3,000 individuals on September 11, 2001.

The combined repercussions of the Arab Spring and bin Laden’s death on political developments in the Arab/Muslim world, on global counterterrorism efforts, on Western policy concerning Pakistan and Afghanistan, and most importantly, on al Qaeda, its global and

¹ Parts of this article were originally published by the author in “Opportunity Costs or Costly Opportunities? The Arab Spring, Osama Bin Laden, and Al-Qaeda’s African Affiliates,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 5:3 (August 2011). See also, Alex Wilner, “Al Qaeda’s Uncertain Future,” *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, No. 98, (Center for Security Studies, July 2011), 1-4; Alex Wilner, “Don’t Let the Fight against al-Qaeda become Old News after Norway,” *National Post*, (July 26, 2011).

regional affiliates, branches, and ideological sympathizers, are poorly understood. Events on the ground are still unfolding and open-source information remains limited and at times murky. Yet one thing is certain: 2011 was marked by a multitude of major events that will have long-lasting ripple effects on a number of critically important and inherently interconnected global issues.

Using the political upheaval in North Africa and bin Laden's demise as a backdrop, this article offers a tentative assessment of how these recent global developments will affect al Qaeda's jihadi affiliates in Africa – al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Somalia's al Shabaab – and an overview of various and competing projections concerning both movements. For Canadians, the manner in which these militant groups respond to recent events and the way they evolve over the coming months will matter. In the first place, terrorism threatens Canadians at home and abroad. Over the past decade, Canadian citizens have been both victims of terrorism and perpetrators of terrorism.² In the second place, al Qaeda has specifically and repeatedly called for attacks on Canadians. How al Qaeda's African affiliates contend with the twin shocks of the Arab Spring and bin Laden's death will help determine Canada's future security environment.

The article is structured accordingly: section one offers a brief overview of AQIM and al Shabaab while sections two and three highlight the effects the Arab Spring and bin Laden's death may have on al Qaeda's African affiliates. The article then offers an overview of how the evolving security environment in Africa will affect Canada's security priorities. The article concludes with a discussion of how Canada and its allies can contain and defeat al Qaeda more generally.

Al Qaeda's African Allies: The Rise of AQIM and al Shabaab

Of the many and varied violent non-state African groups that share some of al Qaeda's ideological principles and practical goals, two currently stand out: al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al Shabaab. Other prominent regional organizations, like the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), al-Itihaad al-Islami (AIAI), Hizbul Islam, or the Armed Islamic Group (popularly known by its French name *Groupe Islamique Armé*, GIA) have largely been destroyed, disbanded, or rolled into other groups. While it is plausible that remnants of these organizations will regroup or that new terrorist organizations will be formed, the focus of international counterterrorism in Africa rests primarily on combatting and containing AQIM and al Shabaab.

² For an overview of these threats, see Alex Wilner, "Terrorism in Canada: Victims and Perpetrators," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 12(3) (2010), 72-99.

AQIM

AQIM traces its roots to Algeria's radical Islamist movement and the Algerian civil war of the 1990s.³ During that conflict, a number of violent Islamist groups took up arms against the Algerian military in hopes of toppling the government and establishing an Islamist state. The most prominent group, the GIA, carried out a devastating domestic terrorism campaign against the Algerian government and internationalized its campaign by targeting foreigners, especially the French (Algeria's historical colonizers), in North Africa and in Europe. By the late 1990s, however, and primarily as a result of the GIA's unprecedented brutality against civilians in Algeria, domestic support for the organization evaporated, and the group eventually fractured. One splinter, the Salafist Group for Call and Combat (*Le Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*, GSPC) eventually rose to prominence in 1998. Bin Laden is suspected of having personally encouraged its formation.⁴ Pledging to avoid targeting civilians, the GSPC continued to harass the government, but its efforts were successfully countered and it was eventually reduced to the mountainous and coastal region of north-eastern Algeria (the Kabylia) and the southern stretches of the Saharan region. In the early 2000s, the GSPC suffered a bout of severe in-fighting over strategy and its loyalty to al Qaeda and global jihad. Despite further losing ground to successful Algerian, American, and European countermeasures following 9/11, the GSPC finally declared its allegiance to al Qaeda. Between 2006 and 2007, the GSPC formally tied itself to global (rather than restrict itself to regional) jihad and officially changed its name to AQIM.

With its rebranding, AQIM changed its style of activity, placing emphasis on large-scale terrorist attacks using explosive devices in a much wider and expanding field of operation spanning parts of Mauritania, Mali, Southern Algeria, Niger, and Chad. In Nigeria, too, AQIM is suspected of having forged a partnership with Boko Haram, a violent Nigerian Islamist group. Intelligence reports from Algeria and Nigeria suggest that "Boko Haram is al Qaeda."⁵ In 2011, Boko Haram carried out a number of devastating terrorist attacks and, with AQIM assistance, introduced Nigeria to suicide bombings. In June 2011, Boko Haram launched its first suicide attack against Nigeria's police headquarters in Abuja. In August 2011, it detonated a suicide car bomb against

³ For more on AQIM's development, goals, and operations, see Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, "The Many Faces of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb" *GCSP Policy Paper* (Geneva Centre for Security Policy), No. 15 (May 2011); Modibo Goita "West Africa's Growing Terrorist Threat: Confronting AQIM's Sahelian Strategy," *Africa Security Brief* (no. 11), (February 2011); Dario Cristiani, "AQIM Operations Threaten Niger's Return to Democracy," *Terrorism Monitor* 9:7 (2011); Dario Cristiani and Riccardo Fabiani, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Implications for Algeria's Regional and International Relations," *IAI Working Paper* 1107 (2011); Government of Australia, "Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb," Australian National Security, July 22, 2010; Dario Cristiani, "Algeria's AQIM Becomes a Regional Threat Despite Surrender of Senior Leaders," *Terrorism Monitor* 8:25 (2010); Camille Tawil, "New Strategies in al-Qaeda's Battle for Algeria," *Terrorism Monitor* 7:22 (2009); Jean-Luc Marret "Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb: A 'Glocal' Organization," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31:6 (2008); Souad Mekhennet et al., "Ragtag Insurgency Gains a Lifeline from Al Qaeda," *New York Times* (July 1, 2008).

⁴ Anneli Botha, "Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalization of Domestic Terrorism," (Pretoria, South Africa: Institute for Security Studies, 2008), 39.

⁵ Joe Brock, "Nigeria Islamists Joining with Jihadist: Army", *Reuters* (November 10, 2011); Lamine Chikhi, "Algeria says Nigeria's Boko Haram Tied to al Qaeda", *Reuters* (November 14, 2011).

a UN compound that left over 20 individuals dead. And on November 4, 2011, Boko Haram carried out a string of suicide bombings and shooting attacks in northeast Nigeria, killing more than 100 individuals. The US Embassy in Nigeria responded by issuing a warning that Boko Haram was preparing attacks against three luxury hotels frequented by foreigners in Abuja.⁶ This wave of violence has all the hallmarks of an al Qaeda campaign.

Elsewhere in the region, between 2005 and 2007, bomb attacks attributed to GSPC/AQIM nearly quadrupled, from 22 to 78.⁷ Since 2006, major attacks attributed to AQIM include multiple assassination attempts on Algeria's president, the 2007 double-car bombing of the UN office in Algiers and the Algiers Constitutional Court, a rudimentary attack in 2008 on Israel's embassy in Mauritania, and a car bombing of a police academy just east of Algiers the same year. In February 2011, Mauritanian security forces intercepted three AQIM car bombs, including one that was destroyed in the capital, Nouakchott. AQIM later revealed that it had intended to assassinate the Mauritanian president.⁸ AQIM also began targeting Westerners in North Africa and the Sahel region. Although it denied responsibility, AQIM was, for instance, blamed for the April 2011 bombing attack on a café in Marrakesh, Morocco, in which over a dozen Westerners — including a pregnant Canadian woman and her Moroccan husband — were killed. The organization also has carried out dozens of bombing attacks and ambushes against security personnel and police, killing and injuring hundreds, and has been involved in dozens of abductions and murders targeting Western tourists, diplomats, and foreign workers in the Sahel region (see below).

Despite these attacks, it appears that AQIM is increasingly “sliding into criminality,” with its activity in the abduction racket and drug trade overshadowing its zeal for political insurgency. Andrew McGregor, director of Aberfoyle International Security in Toronto, goes so far as to suggest that AQIM is turning into “the North African version of the Philippine's Abu Sayyaf movement,” intent on using the “rhetoric of Islamism” to justify its criminal activity.⁹ That may be, but the foiled February 2011 attack in Mauritania, the string of suicide attacks targeting police stations in Bordj Menaïel and Tizi Ouzou, Algeria in July and August 2011, and its increasing cooperation with regional Islamist groups like Boko Haram, suggest AQIM has yet to abandon its jihadist ideology.

⁶ Adam Nossiter, “Islamist Threat with Qaeda Link Grows in Nigeria”, *New York Times* (August 17, 2011); Joe Brock, “Nigerian Islamist Sect Claims bomb attack”, *Reuters* (June 17, 2011); *Associated Press*, “Nigeria Attacks Kill 67; Sect Claims Responsibility” (November 5, 2011); *Associated Press*, “US Warns of Attack by Muslim Sect in Nigeria's Capital” (November 6, 2011).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 51-60.

⁸ *Jeune Afrique*, “Attentat manqué à Nouakchott : AQMI voulait "assassiner" le président Ould Abdelaziz” (February 2, 2011); Mohamedou, “The Many Faces of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb”, 5.

⁹ Andrew McGregor, “Will al-Qaeda Survive the Loss of its Leadership?” *Terrorism Monitor* 8:24 (June 2010).

Al Shabaab

Al Shabaab, like AQIM, traces its roots to a civil war.¹⁰ During the two decades in which Somalia has resembled a failed state, various militant Islamist groups have risen to prominence and controlled parts of the country. As in North Africa, al Qaeda appears to have been active in Somalia as of the early 1990s. The organization claims to have trained some of the Islamists who took part in the 1993 “Battle of Mogadishu,” in which 18 American servicemen were killed, and to have used Somalis to co-ordinate its 1998 bombing of two American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, in which over 200 people were killed. Other indigenous Islamist groups were also active in Somalia in the 1990s. The most prominent, the AIAI, gained a foothold in the east and west, and sought to establish a Shari’a-based emirate. Its ranks included a number of Somali fighters who had fought the Soviets in Afghanistan.¹¹ By 1996/97, however, the AIAI suffered a series of setbacks in confrontations with the Ethiopian military and was largely destroyed as a functioning entity. Some surviving leaders, preying on the continued lack of central government and relying on kinship and clan relations, went on to establish small, autonomous, and locally organized Islamic courts. Eventually, desperate courts and various militias came together under the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) and managed to impose Shari’a law over parts of Somalia. Al Shabaab emerged from within the UIC in 2003/04, led by former AIAI member Aden Hashi Farah “Ayro” (whom the Americans killed in a targeted strike in 2008).¹² With the assistance of al Shabaab, the UIC greatly expanded its control in southern and central Somalia and, by 2006, successfully wrested control of Mogadishu from the Western-backed Transitional Federal Government of Somalia (TFG). The UIC then established a governing coalition under the Supreme Council of Islamic Courts (SCIC). But the SCIC was short-lived. Ethiopia, with American assistance, invaded Somalia in December 2006, destroying the SCIC and reinstating the TFG in Mogadishu.

Ethiopia’s occupation was a rallying cry for al Shabaab. It sought to overthrow the TFG, remove international forces from Somali territory, institute Shari’a law, and establish a larger East African Islamic emirate that would include all of Somalia (including Somaliland and Puntland),

¹⁰ For more on al Shabaab’s evolution, goals, and operations, see Magnus Ranstorp “Terrorist Awakening in Sweden?” *CTC Sentinel* 4:1 (2011); Derek H. Flood, “The Jubaland Initiative: Is Kenya Creating a Buffer State in Southern Somalia?”, *Terrorism Monitor* 9:17 (2011); Muhyadin Ahmed Roble “Conflict Between Somali Leaders Halts Military Operations against Islamist Insurgents,” *Terrorism Monitor* 9:15 (2011); John Rollins “Al Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspectives, Global Presence, and Implications for U.S. Policy,” Washington, DC: Congressional Research Services (CRS) Report for Congress (January 2011); Lauren Ploch, “Countering Terrorism in East Africa: The U.S. Response,” Washington, DC: Congressional Research Services (CRS) Report for Congress (November 2010); Tim Pippard, “Al-Shabab’s Agenda in the Wake of the Kampala Suicide Attacks,” *CTC Sentinel* 3:7 (2010); US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, “Al Qaeda in Yemen and Somalia: A Ticking Time Bomb,” (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2010); David H. Shinn “Somalia’s New Government and the Challenge of Al-Shabab,” *CTC Sentinel* 2:3 (2009); Abdulahi Hassan “Inside Look at the Fighting Between Al-Shabab and Ahlu-Sunna wal-Jama,” *CTC Sentinel* 2:3 (2009); Bronwyn Bruton “In the Quicksands of Somalia: Where Doing Less Helps More,” *Foreign Affairs* (Nov/Dec 2009).

¹¹ L. Ploch, op.cit., 5.

¹² Competing and often contradicting storylines describe the exact circumstances of al Shabaab’s emergence. For example, see Lorenzo Vidino, Raffaelo Pantucci, and Evan Kohlmann, “Bringing Global Jihad to the Horn of Africa: al Shabaab, Western Fighters, and the Sacralization of the Somali Conflict,” *African Security* 3:4 (2010), 221.

parts of eastern Kenya, Ethiopia's Ogaden region, and Djibouti. Al Shabaab quickly regrouped and led a successful and bloody insurgent and terrorism campaign against the TFG, Ethiopian troops, and Ugandan and Burundi peacekeepers supporting the African Union (AU) Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Al Qaeda and other foreign jihadist groups took notice and sought to "globalize Somalia's conflict" by supporting al Shabaab with foreign fighters, equipment, and finances.¹³ Sophisticated methods of attack, including suicide bombings — which had never been used in Somalia before — were imported from jihadi battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan. Under fire, Ethiopia pulled back its forces in January 2009, leaving AU troops to prop up the TFG. By then, al Shabaab had gained control over large swaths of southern Somalia and Mogadishu, and began attracting foreign recruits (including "hundreds" from the Somali diaspora living in the West),¹⁴ strengthening its ties to the global jihadi movement.

However, al Shabaab appears to have lost some ground. In July 2011, it refused to let international aid organizations distribute food and medicine to drought- and famine-stricken parts of Somalia. This angered locals, some of whom turned against it. In a surprise move in August 2011, the group ceded control of Mogadishu to the TFG, completely pulling its forces out of the capital. Whether it did so purely for tactical purposes and with the intention of eventually reoccupying the city, as an al Shabaab spokesperson suggests, remains to be seen.¹⁵ In the meantime, Kenya launched a massive ground incursion into Somalia in October 2011, after blaming al Shabaab militants for abducting several British, French, and Spanish tourists and aid workers from Kenya. Ethiopia followed suit in November 2011, once again sending a contingent of soldiers into Somalia.¹⁶ These ongoing offensives are reportedly being supported by France, the UK, the US, and even Israel, and have the backing of Rwanda, South Africa, and Uganda. Al Shabaab has responded, predictably, by launching a number of bombing and shooting attacks in Kenya, killing and injuring dozens of civilians, and threatening violence in other neighbouring countries. Whether Kenya and Ethiopia will be successful in "defeating" al Shabaab is an open question.¹⁷ That other states, including the US, have repeatedly failed to contain Somalia's violent Islamists and bring order to the country is not promising. And just as al Shabaab managed to use Ethiopia's 2006 intervention and Uganda's support for AMISOM to recruit new members, strengthen its movement, and propagandize its cause, Kenya's and Ethiopia's recent military incursions risk doing more harm than good over the long-term.

While some al Shabaab fighters retain their clan-based loyalties, the group's ideology aligns with the transnational jihadi movement. Like the AIAI and UIC, al Shabaab believes that strict

¹³ Bronwyn Bruton, "Somalia: A New Approach," Council on Foreign Relations, Special Report 52 (2010), 8.

¹⁴ Lorenzo Vidino *et al.*, "Bringing Global Jihad to the Horn of Africa," 225-227.

¹⁵ Muhyadin Ahmed Roble, "Somalia's Famine Contributes to Popular Revolt against al-Shabaab Militants," *Terrorism Monitor* 9:31 (August 2011), 3-5; Jeffrey Gettleman and Mohammed Ibrahim, "Shabab Concede Control of Capital to Somalia Government," *New York Times*, August 6, 2011; Farouk Chothia, "Could Somali Famine Deal a Fatal Blow to al-Shaba?" *BBC News* (August 9, 2011).

¹⁶ Jeffrey Gettleman, "African Union considers Sending Ethiopian Troops to Somalia", *New York Times* (November 17, 2011); Jeffrey Gettleman, "Ethiopian Troops Said to Enter Somalia, Opening New Front Against Militants", *New York Times* (November 20, 2011).

¹⁷ Clar Ni Chonghaile, "Somalia, Kenya, and Uganda Pledge to Defeat al-Shabaab Rebels", *The Guardian* (November 17, 2011).

“religious governance is the solution to Somalia’s ills.” Yet it diverges from these groups by espousing an internationalist perspective and actively seeking to replace Somalia’s traditional clan structure with a pan-Islamist one.¹⁸ It has had a natural inclination, then, to support al Qaeda’s global efforts and actively sought closer ties with the organization in 2008. At the time, al Shabaab’s Mukhtar Robow stated that “Al Qaeda is the mother of the holy war in Somalia... Most of our leaders were trained in Al Qaeda camps. We are negotiating how we can unite into one.”¹⁹ That alliance was officially forged in February 2010 when al Shabaab declared that it was connecting “the horn of Africa jihad to the one led by al Qaeda and its leader Sheikh Osama Bin Laden.”²⁰

In terms of terrorism, al Shabaab has repeatedly proven its willingness and ability to coordinate mass-casualty attacks. It has targeted Somali, Ethiopian, and AU forces along with Somali and foreign government officials and civilians. Some of its most devastating attacks include a suspected 2007 missile strike on an AU cargo plane taking off from Mogadishu; a 2008 attack in Puntland that killed dozens of Ethiopian immigrants; simultaneous suicide attacks in 2008 in Puntland and Somaliland targeting the UN, an Ethiopian consulate, the president’s palace, and the Puntland Intelligence Service;²¹ a 2009 attack on an AU base that killed and injured over 25 Burundi peacekeepers; a 2009 hotel bombing in Beledweyne that killed 20 people, including Somalia’s security minister and former ambassador to Ethiopia; a 2009 attack on an AU base in Mogadishu that killed 17 soldiers, including AMISOM’s deputy director; a 2010 attack on a commencement ceremony for medical students in Mogadishu that killed over 25 people, including four TFG ministers; and a 2010 attack on a mosque in Mogadishu, that killed and injured over 100 people. On October 4, 2011, al Shabaab carried out its bloodiest attack yet, killing over 100 individuals in a suicide bombing targeting Somalia’s education ministry in Mogadishu.

Despite the brutality and frequency of these and many other attacks, al Shabaab began to concern Western security officials primarily as a result its out-of-theatre engagements. Tangential links have been observed between al Shabaab and a foiled 2009 terrorist plot in Australia; and citizens from Canada, the US, and Europe have travelled to Somalia to train with al Shabaab.²² While some have died fighting in Africa, officials fear others will return to their country of citizenship to engage in terrorism there. In January 2010, for instance, Danish police shot a Somali man with suspected links to al Shabaab as he tried to attack political cartoonist, Kurt Westergaard. And in July 2010, after uniting with al Qaeda, al Shabaab carried out its first bombing attack outside Somalia, killing and injuring nearly 150 people watching the FIFA World

¹⁸ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, “The Strategic Challenge of Somalia’s Al-Shabaab,” *Middle East Quarterly* 16:4 (2009), 25-36.

¹⁹ Quoted in Edmund Sanders, “Conditions May be Ripe for Al Qaeda to Gain in Somalia,” *Los Angeles Times* (August 25, 2008).

²⁰ Sarah Childress, “Somalia’s al Shabaab to Ally with al Qaeda,” *Wall Street Journal* (February 2, 2010),

²¹ American Shirwa Ahmed took part, becoming the first known American suicide bomber. Since then, at least another two American citizens have carried out al Shabaab suicide attacks. See Abdi Guled, “Militant say Suicide Bomber was Somali-American,” *Associated Press*, June 2, 2011.

²² Raffaello Pantucci, “Operational Neath: Is Somalia’s al-Shabaab Movement Active in Australia?” *Terrorism Monitor* 9:3 (2011).

Cup in Kampala, Uganda. Given the continued absence of any central authority in Somalia and al Shabaab's meteoric rise since 2007, the group has become a major regional and international terrorist threat.

The Arab Spring: Shifting Narratives, New Opportunities

"We watch with you this great historic event," stated Osama bin Laden "and we share with you joy and happiness and delight and felicity...We are happy for what makes you happy, and we are sad for what makes you sad. So congratulations to you for your victories."²³ It may have taken several months, but bin Laden finally went on record with an audio recording specifically focused on the Arab uprising — even though the recording was made public two weeks after his death. Bin Laden followed Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Yahay al-Libi and other ideologues in tacitly approving the popular (and mostly secular) movements sweeping the MENA region. Starting in early 2011, al-Zawahiri (who replaced bin Laden as al Qaeda's number one) released a series of five recordings, three of which specifically address the protest movements.²⁴ "Your jihadi brethren," he exclaims, "are confronting alongside you the same enemy, America and its Western allies, those who set up...Husni Mubarak, Zein al-Abidin b. Ali, Ali Abdallah Saleh, Abdallah b. Hussein and their ilk to rule over you."²⁵ In trying to connect al Qaeda's long-standing and violent struggle against the secular (and "apostate") regimes of Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and Jordan, al-Zawahiri's objective is to paint the enemies of the Arab Spring and the enemies of al Qaeda as one and the same. Yet, despite a narrative that purposefully attempts to unite the popular movements with al Qaeda, it is clear that the actors involved in each struggle (a secular and generally non-violent youth movement contrary to a violent Islamist jihadist movement) and their respective goals (presumably, a secular and democratic system, contrary to an Islamic system of governance) are intrinsically opposed. There is only so much al Qaeda can do to credibly recast and reshape these two competing narratives in its attempt to hijack the evolving Arab and Muslim political movement.

Instead, good reasons support why the popular uprising has weakened al Qaeda and its branches, offshoots, and supporters active in the NEMA region. First, in Egypt and Tunisia, a handful of technologically-savvy youth spurred a popular movement that accomplished in weeks of peaceful protest what al Qaeda and its allies could not with violence over several decades. Al-Zawahiri, for instance, has been seeking President Mubarak's removal and the establishment of an Islamic state since before he took over EIJ in the mid-1980s. That change of political leadership finally came to Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya (and likely to Yemen and Syria, too)

²³ Quoted in Scott Shane, "In Message, Bin Laden Praised Arab Revolt," *New York Times*, May 18, 2011.

²⁴ Al-Zawahiri's role within al Qaeda, the prominence of other al Qaeda leaders, and whether or not al-Zawahiri will fully replace bin Laden are the subject of some debate among al Qaeda experts. See Jeremy Binnie, "Dead Man's Shoes: Al-Qaeda Looks to a Future without Bin Laden," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (June 2011), 8-11; Noman Benotman and James Brandon, "The Coming Struggle within al-Qaeda," *Quilliam Briefing* (May 10, 2011); and Murad Batal al-Shishani, "Understanding Strategic Change in al-Qaeda's Central Leadership after Bin Laden," *Terrorism Monitor* 9:23 (2011), 7-9.

²⁵ See, Nelly Lahoud, "Ayman al-Zawahiri's Reaction to Revolution in the Middle East," *CTC Sentinel* 4:4 (2011), 5.

as a result of popular movements is an embarrassment to al Qaeda, whose entire script has been predicated on the idea that violent overthrow is the only way forward. And even if only the Egyptian, Tunisian, and Libyan revolutions “prove successful,” explains Middle East expert Michael Ryan, “a major part of the Arab world will have unfurled the banner of modernization and democracy...which could become a new beacon for a large part of the Arab Middle East.”²⁶ Suddenly, another, gentler way to achieve change appears possible — one that appeals to a much broader popular base, does not alienate potential supporters with excesses in violence, and has, until now, proven successful at least three times. The challenge facing al Qaeda is to repackage its own brutally violent and perpetually ineffective methods so as to remain a viable option to potential supporters who now have other models and movements from which to choose.

In a similar vein, al Qaeda has long relied on the autocratic MENA regimes themselves to help it resonate with its prospective popular base. As Nelly Lahoud of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point recounts, “the jihadist narrative enjoyed greater credibility under the autocratic regimes” where endemic corruption, economic and political malaise, and brutality fed the flames of popular despair.²⁷ In the wake of this despair, al Qaeda picked out and assembled recruits. It offered to those who would listen an alternative to the existing system, suggesting that by violently overthrowing these regimes and establishing pure Islamic governance in their stead, Muslims and Arabs would reconstitute their historical greatness with regard to the West. But now that several of these regimes have been mortally wounded, al Qaeda’s message is called into question. Not only was al Qaeda barely visible during the revolutions, but with its target regimes gone, it also lost its power of juxtaposition. One might even ask whether al Qaeda is still needed at all, given the initial success of the protest movements.

This is why al-Zawahiri, after congratulating the masses, immediately called for the establishment of pure Islamic governance, warning that without it, these recent popular achievements would be lost. He cautions that the future may resemble the past and al Qaeda’s struggle will continue. It is in these warnings that can be seen how the Arab Spring may, in the long run, help rather than hurt al Qaeda and its African affiliates.

Al Qaeda has cleverly positioned itself to gain traction among disaffected Arabs and Muslims if and when these experiments in people-power fail. What if democracy does not ameliorate or alleviate social, political, and economic grievances? What if democracy proves unstable, unworkable, or chaotic in Egypt and Tunisia? What if tomorrow’s leaders turn out to be just as corrupt as past leaders? “In reality,” explains Juan Zarate, Deputy National Security Advisor for Combating Terrorism under President George W. Bush, al Qaeda’s leaders “are banking on the disillusionment that inevitably follows revolutions to reassert their prominence in the region.”²⁸ The transition from dictatorship to democracy can be long and difficult.²⁹ New institutions need to be established, a new political culture must take root, and the power vacuum left by

²⁶ Michael Ryan, “What do the Uprisings in the Middle East mean for al-Qaeda?” *Terrorism Monitor* 9:11, (March 2011), 6

²⁷ N. Lahoud, “Ayman al-Zawahiri’s Reaction,” 6.

²⁸ Juan Zarate, “Al Qaeda Stirs Again,” *New York Times*, April 18, 2011.

outgoing elites needs to be filled. All this takes time. The process of building social and political cohesion may require a level of patience not common among Arab revolutionary movements.

Thus, in the chaos that followed the revolutions, al Qaeda's African allies may find opportunities to regroup, recover, and re-emerge. As Philip Mudd, former Deputy Director of the Counterterrorist Center at the CIA, illustrates, opening the democratic space and establishing competing political parties in the MENA region might lead to "ethnic and religious fissures that turn violent."³⁰ Think of Lebanon or Iraq. Already, attacks against Egypt's Christian communities are on the rise and sectarian lines are being drawn. In October 2011, for instance, over 25 mostly Coptic protesters were killed by security forces during a peaceful demonstration in Cairo.³¹ Furthermore, in the time it takes for political stability to return, crime and economic stagnation remain a distinct possibility. In fact, it could take years to consolidate the market reforms needed to liberalize and improve MENA economies. It will also take time to build proper democratic institutions and redraw civil-military relations. Until then, millions of individuals will remain unemployed, underutilized, and undervalued — potentially easy prey for a resurgent al Qaeda.

From this perspective, what matters now is the management of political, social, and economic expectations.³² The greater the level of post-revolution optimism among Arabs and Muslims, the greater the risk of exceptionally high levels of disillusionment, resentment, and anger if and when things go sour. If the uprising's popular base cannot achieve fast and noticeable improvements to its collective lot, al Qaeda's narrative stands to gain a second inquisitive look and renewed interest. A surge in support for al Qaeda's allies is a possibility.³³ And if MENA economies continue to limp along in 2013 and 2014, if new leaders prove ineffective at addressing existing grievances, and if internecine violence and fear rather than political stability and hope take root, al Qaeda's narrative will get another chance to resonate with disaffected communities.

Importantly, al Qaeda does not have to watch the drama unfold passively. It can take active steps to consolidate its base and improve its position as the upheaval unfolds. Lorenzo Vidino, a Fellow at the Center for Security Studies at the ETH Zurich, writes — pointing to the "ungoverned areas" of Pakistan, Iraq, and Yemen — that "jihadist movements could gain traction in newly formed pockets of instability" currently spreading over North Africa.³⁴ For instance, the AU's African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism noted in May 2011

²⁹ Cf. Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, "Democratization and War," *Foreign Affairs* 74:3 (May-June 1995), 79-97; Gretchen Casper, *Fragile Democracies: The Legacies of Authoritarian Rule* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995); David Mack, "Hold the Applause: Revolutions like Egypt's most often end badly," *Foreign Policy* (February 3, 2011),

³⁰ Philip Mudd, "How the Arab Spring Could Embolden Extremists," *CTC Sentinel* 4:4 (April 2011), 7.

³¹ David Kirkpatrick, "Egypt's Christians feel more Peril with Revolution," *New York Times* (June 1, 2011); David Kirkpatrick, "Copts Denounce Egyptian Government Over Killings", *New York Times* (October 10, 2011).

³² See Brian Michael Jenkins, "Al Qaeda after Bin Laden", Testimony before the US House of Representatives (Committee on Armed Services), November 1, 2011.

³³ European Police Office (EUROPOL), *TE-SAT 2011: EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report*, (2011), 6.

³⁴ Lorenzo Vidino, "Ballots not Bullets: Facing the New Islamist Challenge," *ISN Insights* (May 31, 2011).

that AQIM sleeper cells were actively recruiting and doing field work in Africa.³⁵ Taking advantage of the chaos and the shifting security environment in the region makes sense. Political prisoners held as suspected extremists in Egyptian, Tunisian, Libyan, and Yemeni jails have been freed; some might be susceptible to al Qaeda's advances. As well, domestic instability will provide increasingly porous and under-defended borders, easing the movement of people, contraband, and weapons between and within African countries. As Daniel Byman, a terrorism expert at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, points out, jihadists have used civil wars as opportunities before, posing as supporters of the opposition to "spread their vitriol" and attract recruits to their cause over time.³⁶ In this regard, Islamist militants are suspected of having fought alongside the Libyan rebels and might be able to carve out a regional haven and attract supporters.³⁷ As for al Shabaab, it simply has to look north, over the Gulf of Aden into Yemen at al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). AQAP has gained ground as the Yemeni government has faltered. Since May 2011, for instance, AQAP has consolidated its foothold and taken over towns in southern Yemen as government forces ceded control.³⁸ Al Shabaab, already suspected of having close links to AQAP, could catch a needed windfall as a result of AQAP's growing regional influence.

For AQIM, Libya poses a unique opportunity. Numerous accounts suggest that AQIM took advantage of the civil war to help itself to Colonel Gaddafi's weapons stockpiles that were "liberated" by anti-government forces. In April 2011, Idriss Deby, President of Chad, noted that he was "100 percent" certain that AQIM had pillaged military caches in eastern Libya and acquired heavy weapons. His assertion was repeated by the President of Niger and various Algerian officials and later confirmed, in November 2011, by AQIM itself. Mokhtar Belmokhtar, one of AQIM's leaders, told Mauritanian reporters that "it was perfectly natural" that AQIM had "acquired Libyan weapons."³⁹ Of greatest concern is Libya's stockpile of shoulder-launched anti-aircraft weapons, often referred to as MANPADS (or *man-portable air defense systems*). These weapons are light-weight, transportable, and, in the wrong hands, can be used to shoot down commercial airlines.⁴⁰ US government estimates suggest that Gaddafi amassed roughly 20,000 of these rockets.⁴¹ Even if only a handful of these weapons reach al Qaeda, a repeat of its 2002 attack in Mombasa, Kenya, in which two shoulder-launched missiles were fired against an Israeli-owned charter plane taking off from Moi International Airport, remains a distinct possibility. And while US officials have predicted that most of Libya's unsecured MANPADS are

³⁵ *Agence France-Presse*, "Al-Qaeda has Sleeper Cells across west Africa: Experts," May 26, 2011.

³⁶ Daniel Byman, "Terrorism After the Revolutions: How Secular Uprisings could Help (or Hurt) Jihadists," *Foreign Affairs* 90:3 (2011), 52.

³⁷ See Alison Pargeter "Are Islamist Extremists Fighting among Libya's Rebels?" *CTC Sentinel* 4:4 (April 2011), 9-13.

³⁸ Bruce Riedel, "AQAP's 'Great Expectations' for the Future", *CTC Sentinel* 4:8 (August 2011), 1-4.

³⁹ See Christophe Boisbouvier, "AQMI Sans Ben Laden," *Jeune Afrique*, (May 23, 2011); François Soudan, "Idriss Déby Itno : "Si la Libye implose, les conséquences seront incalculables pour la région", *Jeune Afrique* (April 6, 2011); Damien McElroy, "Libya: Algeria Closes Borders as Row Rages over Weapons Smuggling", *The Telegraph* (September 4, 2011); *Le Temps d'Algérie* "Mokhtar Belmokhtar Affirme qu'Al-Qaida détient des Armes Libyennes" (November 9, 2011).

⁴⁰ James Chow, et al., *Protecting Commercial Aviation against the Should-fired Missile Threat*, (RAND Corp., 2005).

⁴¹ Eli Lake, "Libya's Missiles, Chemicals Worry U.S.," *Washington Times*, August 24, 2011.

still in the country, the Israelis are not taking any chances.⁴² In November 2011, Israeli officials said they were accelerating a program to equip *all* commercial jets flown by El Al and two other Israeli airline companies with locally made anti-missile defence systems that can “blind” heat-seeking missiles with lasers. The Israeli government is expected to foot the \$1.5 million bill the program will cost. For Israelis, the worry is that Libyan MANPADS will reach Hamas in the Gaza Strip and other al Qaeda-linked militants in Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula and from there find their way to the West Bank and in range of planes heading to and from Israel’s Ben-Gurion International Airport. “We have long been aware of the threat,” an Israeli official noted, “and we’re ahead of the rest of the world in preparing for it.”⁴³ Unfortunately for the rest of us, no other government is likely to pre-emptively follow suit until a Libyan MANPAD is actually pointed at a commercial aircraft.

Making Due without bin Laden

On the cover of its May 7/11, 2011, edition, *The Economist* titled its coverage of bin Laden’s death, “Now, kill his dream.” The title is apt. It implies that even in death bin Laden’s vision retains its power and his ideology will continue to spur others towards violence. When gauging the meaning and possible effect bin Laden’s death will have on al Qaeda’s African supporters, this dichotomy — between facilitating terrorism and inspiring terrorism — proves useful.

In practice, bin Laden was not only al Qaeda’s primary figurehead. He led the organization for 23 years, laid out its strategic goals, secured religious approval for its tactics, oversaw its regional expansion, and was involved in planning many of its spectacular attacks. He was both operationally and strategically active. What is less certain is the degree of control bin Laden retained over al Qaeda’s sprawling structure in the decade following 9/11 and especially after its safe haven in Afghanistan was removed. The debate since 2006 has pitted terrorism experts who have observed a “leaderless” al Qaeda movement of loosely affiliated groups and individuals sharing a common ideology against those who maintain that al Qaeda’s core leadership — including bin Laden — retained an important role in directing the organization’s international and regional efforts despite the loss Afghanistan.⁴⁴ The truth probably rests somewhere in the middle: bin Laden (and al Qaeda’s central leadership) both directed al Qaeda-sponsored attacks and legitimized al Qaeda-inspired attacks in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and the West.

⁴² Christian Lowe, “Most Looted Missiles Still in Libya: US Official”, *Reuters* (November 14, 2011).

⁴³ Dan Williams, “Israel Rushes Airliner Defenses as Libya Leaks SAMs”, *Reuters* (November 11, 2011).

⁴⁴ See the debate between Bruce Hoffman and Marc Sageman. Elaine Sciolino and Eric Schmitt, “A Not Very Private Feud over Terrorism,” *New York Times*, 8 June 2008; Marc Sageman. *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University Press, 2008); Bruce Hoffman, “The Myth of Grass-Roots Terrorism,” *Foreign Affairs* 87(3) (2008); Bruce Hoffman, “Terrorism in the West: Al-Qaeda’s Role in ‘Homegrown’ Terror,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 13 (2007), 91–99.

Even from his hideout in Abbottabad, Pakistan, bin Laden appears to have been well connected with al Qaeda, and may have even directed some of its efforts.⁴⁵ That does not mean, however, that al Qaeda's supporters, franchises, and offshoots relied on the organization's central leadership to plan, finance, and orchestrate their attacks. They did not. Al Qaeda's affiliates have always retained a degree of autonomy and have used that freedom accordingly. While they have signed on to al Qaeda's global venture, they have largely controlled their own destinies. That al Qaeda in Iraq's leader, Musab al-Zarqawi, was apparently personally chastised by al-Zawahiri in 2005 for having so blatantly alienated Iraq's Sunni and Shi'a communities with his violent excesses, speaks volumes. Clearly, al Qaeda had little operational control over its Iraqi franchise even though al-Zarqawi had declared allegiance to bin Laden and nominally sought to advance al Qaeda's global ambitions. The same is likely true of al Qaeda's other branches in Africa and the Middle East.

Arguably, although bin Laden's removal is a defining and monumental event in American and global counterterrorism, his death may have limited effect on AQIM, al Shabaab, and other al Qaeda allies. While bin Laden's charisma, inspirational importance, and historical significance will be impossible to replace, in practical and operational terms, his death will not greatly impede al Qaeda's regional franchises from planning further attacks and consolidating their regional gains. They did so while bin Laden was alive, and will continue now that he is dead. So while bin Laden's death may send a deterrent message to current and would-be terrorist leaders that the US will, in due time, find a way to kill or capture them, and while al Qaeda may suffer power vacuums, fractures, and internecine feuding until (and unless) a strong leader steps in, al Qaeda's African allies will survive as they did under bin Laden's tenure.⁴⁶

Nonetheless, bin Laden's death will have an effect on their behaviour. It is possible, as McGregor writes, that "the elimination of al-Qaeda's core leadership will result in the inevitable localization of the 'global jihad'; or in jihadist terms, a refocus on the 'Near Enemy' [local regimes] over the 'Far Enemy' [the US and the West]."⁴⁷ Others agree, suggesting that al Qaeda's allies may concentrate on "less risky" regional attacks rather than target the West and absorb the inevitable retaliation.⁴⁸ In this case, al Qaeda allies might revert to their regional agendas, tailoring their attacks to affect change in their immediate spheres of influence rather than launch far-flung attacks against the US, Canada, the UK, or France, a strategy they adopted when they declared allegiance to bin Laden. They may also become even more autonomous, expressing continued fealty to al Qaeda while paying more attention to local financial, social, and human dynamics.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Eli Lake, "'Emir' bin Laden oversaw al Qaeda from compound," *The Washington Times*, May 3, 2011; Fernando Reinares, "Who Said 'Leaderless Jihad'?" Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, June 1, 2011; Daniel Dombey, "Questions Swirl on Bin Laden's Control," *Financial Times*, May 13, 2011.

⁴⁶ Bruce Hoffman, "Bin Laden's Killing and its Effect on Al-Qa'ida: What Comes Next?" *CTC Sentinel* (Special Issue), May 2011, 2.

⁴⁷ Andrew McGregor, "Will al-Qaeda Survive the Loss of its Leadership?" *Terrorism Monitor* 8:24 (June 2010).

⁴⁸ J. Binnie, "Dead Man's Shoes," *op.cit.*, 12-13.

⁴⁹ See John Rollins, "Osama bin Laden's Death: Implications and Considerations," Congressional Research Service Report to Congress, No. 7-5700 (May 5, 2011), 6.

Of course, the opposite alternative is possible, too. In the case of AQIM, Camille Tawil, an expert on jihadism, posits that if al-Zawahiri is fully accepted as the new emir of al Qaeda, the organization may have a greater role in shaping AQIM's behaviour. Al-Zawahiri was instrumental in bringing the GSPC under the al Qaeda umbrella, and he also personally asked AQIM to limit its operations in Libya in the hope of placating a faction of the LIFG.⁵⁰ Under al-Zawahiri's leadership, al Qaeda may re-engage its relationship with AQIM and other jihadists in North Africa. But even then, to date, al Qaeda's African supporters have lacked the ability to launch international attacks like those carried out by Yemen's AQAP in 2009 and 2010. While AQIM tries to link its kidnapping of Westerners in Africa as part and parcel of its global war against the West, it has difficulty masking the economic incentive of keeping these hostages alive to trade them for cash. And although AQIM has greatly expanded its operations into West Africa, it has rarely successfully attacked Western targets therein and even denied involvement in the latest attack in Morocco, which killed over a dozen Westerners. As for al Shabaab, while it has attracted many Western citizens to join its local efforts, it has carried out attacks outside Somalia on only two occasions, the 2010 suicide bombings in Kampala and the small-scale attacks in Kenya in 2011. But these attacks were carried out for local reasons (to punish Uganda and Kenya for sending troops to Somalia) rather than to conform to al Qaeda's global mantra. In sum, while AQIM and al Shabaab may strive to continue carrying bin Laden's internationalist agenda, they may revert to local programs instead.

A Future in Flux: Canada's Security Priorities

It is clear that the Arab Spring and bin Laden's death will leave a mark on al Qaeda and its affiliates in Africa. The organization has scrambled to rebrand itself in the light of the dramatic changes sweeping through its strategic backyard, and the death of its charismatic leader robs it and its allies of a pre-eminent and guiding force. At the same time, it is a mistake to place too much emphasis on these twin shocks. Political upheaval provides al Qaeda, AQIM, and al Shabaab with new opportunities, especially if socio-political and economic grievances are not properly met. And while bin Laden will surely be missed, al Qaeda has never been chiefly about one man. In its May 6, 2011, statement confirming his death, al Qaeda reminds us that "Sheikh Osama did not build this organization to die with his death."⁵¹ Though weakened, al Qaeda and its African affiliates will march on.

For Canadians, uncertainty in Africa may breed insecurity at home. AQIM's and al Shabaab's evolution will affect Canadians in three distinct ways.

First, if al Qaeda's African allies are able to rebound, regroup, and rearm, some Canadian citizens are likely to join their ranks. Over the past five years, a number of Canadians have travelled to foreign battlefields to join militant groups and terrorist organizations. At times,

⁵⁰ Camille Tawil, "How Bin Ladin's Death Will Affect Al-Qa'ida's Regional Franchises," *CTC Sentinel* (Special Issue), May 2011, 7-8. See also, Geoff Porter, "The Impact of Bin Ladin's Death on AQIM in North Africa," *CTC Sentinel* (Special Issue), May 2011, 10-12.

⁵¹ Quoted in J. Binnie, "Dead Man's Shoes," *op. cit.*, 8.

these recruits have trained alongside al Qaeda militants to participate in regional and global conflicts. As of 2011, the RCMP and CSIS are believed to be investigating nearly two dozen Canadians suspected of having joined al Shabaab. At least two of these recruits have died fighting with the group, the latest reportedly killed in June 2011.⁵² Other Canadians have been intercepted and arrested on their way to joining al Shabaab. Police arrested Mohamed Hassan Hersi, for example, at Toronto's Pearson International Airport in March 2011 for allegedly planning to join the organization.⁵³

If and when Canadians head to North Africa or Somalia to join militant organizations, they create two related security problems. First, these recruits facilitate terrorism abroad that targets innocent civilians and destabilizes governments. In this respect, it is not enough that a vast majority of Canadians condemn terrorism. We must also collectively do our utmost to ensure that Canadian citizens are not part of the problem, that Canadians themselves are not participating in terrorist activity abroad. While Canadians should certainly place a premium on protecting themselves from terrorism at home, ensuring that fellow citizens do not become "foreign fighters" within organizations operating abroad is also a priority. And second, in joining foreign terrorist organizations, Canadian recruits create a security threat for other Canadians as well. Canadian terrorists may eventually return home to wreak havoc on our streets. This has already happened elsewhere. Consider that US Major Nidal Hasan (who attacked fellow soldiers at Fort Hood in November 2009), British-educated Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab (the underwear bomber who failed to detonate explosives over the skies of Detroit on December 25, 2009), American Najibullah Zazi (who pled guilty in February 2010 to planning attacks on New York City subways), and American Faisal Shahzad (who nearly succeeded in detonating a car bomb in Times Square in May 2010) all received a degree of ideological and/or practical guidance from terrorists living overseas. Abdulmutallab, Zazi, and Shahzad were each purposefully dispatched by foreign terrorist organizations to return to the US and carry out attacks against Americans. Hassan received online guidance from American citizen and former AQAP leader, Anwar al-Awlaki. It is not a stretch to suggest that a similar fate may await Canadian terrorists training abroad. For al Qaeda and its affiliates, these Western recruits are a prize. Attracting, recruiting, and training Westerners to conduct acts of terrorism in the countries in which they retain citizenship is a coup. These recruits have "clean skins"; they do not have criminal records and attract little attention from security personnel. They also have legitimate travel documents and a keen sense of how to blend into the society they plan to attack. "You can't take someone from the slums of Mogadishu and take them on some suicide mission to Rome, Paris, New York," explains terrorism expert, Bruce Hoffman.⁵⁴ It is far more prudent and effective to train radicalized Westerners in terrorism and send them back home.

Second, the stronger al Qaeda's African affiliates become, the greater the threat to Westerners travelling in the region. This is especially true concerning AQIM, whose primary activity has involved abducting Westerners and either killing them or trading them for money and other

⁵² Stewart Bell, "Canada-linked Militant Killed in Mogadishu," *National Post*, June 9, 2011.

⁵³ Colin Freeze and Greg McArthur, "Man Jailed in New Kind of Terrorist Case for Canada," *Globe and Mail*, March 20, 2011.

⁵⁴ Amy Forliti, "Somali Militants Use Many Tactics to Woo Americans," *Associated Press*, August 25, 2009.

political concessions. It has repeatedly illustrated its ability and willingness to do so. Some high profile cases include the June 2009 killing of an American aid worker in Mauritania and of British hostage, Edwin Dyer, in Mali; the December 2009 abduction of an Italian man in Mauritania; the April 2010 abduction and execution of a French aid worker in Niger; the June 2010 kidnapping of a British aid worker in Chad; the September 2010 abduction of five French nationals in Niger; the November 2010 kidnapping of three Spanish aid workers in Mauritania; the January 2011 killing of two French nationals in Niger; and the May 2011 abduction of two European nationals in Nigeria. Canadians, too, have been targeted specifically. In December 2008, Canadian diplomats, Robert Fowler and Louis Guay, were captured by tribal militants in Niger and later delivered to AQIM. They were released in April 2009, in a deal partially orchestrated by Canada in partnership with Mali, Chad, Niger, and others, that purportedly saw the release of four AQIM terrorists, including a bomb-maker, from a Mali prison.⁵⁵ In 2011, Fowler published a book, *A Season in Hell*, describing the ordeal. He concludes that al Qaeda's "trademark ... is in good repair" and that its North African branch has gained strength.⁵⁶ If AQIM expands its operational base, more Westerners, including Canadians, working and living in the Sahel region will be at risk.

Third, the more capable al Qaeda's global affiliates become, the greater their ability to successfully conduct attacks abroad. Al Qaeda's primary objective is to attack Westerners; groups that have pledged their allegiance share that goal. Al Qaeda has targeted Westerners abroad (in the US and Europe, for instance) and regionally (by attacking embassies, foreign workers, and diplomats). Embassies are a favoured target. Although no Canadian consular office has yet to suffer an attack, since 2006, terrorists have struck American, Danish, British, Dutch, Australian, Indian, Israeli, and French consular offices worldwide. The 1998 bombings of American embassies in Tanzania and Nairobi, which al Qaeda orchestrated, remain the most devastating examples. Embassies have symbolic value and offer assailants a target-rich environment where Westerners are known to work and congregate. Canadian embassies aside, terrorists have specifically targeted other identifiably Canadian assets. Most notably, two Air Canada planes flying from London, England, to Montreal and Toronto were to be destroyed as part of al Qaeda's 2006 plot to detonate liquid-based explosives aboard nearly a dozen transatlantic aircraft. Had the attack not been foiled, hundreds of Canadians would have perished.

If AQIM or al Shabaab gain in strength, they may be more likely to shift their attention toward conducting anti-Western attacks abroad. For now, neither group has done so, though each has conducted regional attacks against Westerners in Africa, and al Shabaab, with its brazen 2010 attack in Uganda, has proven its willingness and ability to conduct mass-casualty suicide attacks outside its immediate field of operation. It is possible that, like AQAP in Yemen, (which launched attacks against the West, including the 2009 underwear bomber and the 2010 cargo plane plot after gaining strength) AQIM and al Shabaab may focus some of their energy on out-

⁵⁵ Colin Freeze, "Operation Diplomat," *Globe and Mail*, June 3, 2009; Geoffrey York, "The Secret Mali Deal to Release Two Canadians," *Globe and Mail*, October 10, 2009; Colin Freeze, "Ransom Paid for Canadian Diplomats, Leaked Cable Suggests," *Globe and Mail*, February 3, 2011.

⁵⁶ Meagan Fitzpatrick, "Al-Qaeda 'brand' growing stronger in North Africa", *CBC News* (November 8, 2011).

of-theatre operations if and when they consolidate gains. Canadians may well be in their crosshairs.

Conclusion: Containing al Qaeda in the Future

No doubt exists that al Qaeda has suffered some setbacks. How significant these setbacks truly are and how well al Qaeda manages its immediate future will partly depend on how the West responds to shifting regional dynamics.⁵⁷

To begin with, Canada and its allies should help consolidate the changes sweeping the Arab world. Doing so would be in their best interest and would simultaneously ensure that al Qaeda cannot easily recuperate. A pressing issue is the proper management of expectations. Tunisians, Egyptians, and Libyans have risen up in the hope of establishing a better and more equitable life. If their efforts fail or if future Arab governments cannot bring about noticeable political, social, and economic improvements, anger and resentment are sure to follow. The West should, where feasible, support democracy movements in the region with technical assistance, expertise, and advice. Since democracy will falter without fiscal, economic, managerial, and monetary improvements, it should help liberalize and modernize Arab economies by offering financial assistance and loans along with the trade and investment opportunities already pledged by the G8. Importantly, promises and partnerships offered by the West must be met. If the Arab Spring brings real and lasting change to millions of disaffected Arab youth, al Qaeda's message, tactics, and goals may be irreparably deflated.

Secondly, Canada must proactively assist international efforts to locate, secure, and destroy Libya's missing missiles. Ottawa has already signalled its intention to do so. In October 2011, Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird, after visiting Tripoli, announced a plan to commit \$10 million to help Libya's transitional government secure Gaddafi's stockpiles of MANPADS and dispose of the old regime's weapons of mass destruction.⁵⁸ This is a good start, but more can be done. On October 31, 2011, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2017, which calls upon the Libyan government "to take all necessary steps to ensure the proper custody of portable surface-to-air missiles". The resolution also requires that African states take measures to "prevent proliferation" of these weapons and asks all members of the UN to assist in these regional efforts.⁵⁹ Besides its financial assistance, Canada can play a part by sending specialized mine-clearing teams and other technical and explosives experts to Libya to help track and dispose of these weapons. Other countries, like Germany, Switzerland, the UK, and the US, have already done so.⁶⁰ Canada can also offer assistance to other African countries and help them build the infrastructure they need to better police and monitor their borders.

⁵⁷ Some of these arguments were originally explored in Alex Wilner "Al Qaeda's Uncertain Future," 4.

⁵⁸ Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, "Minister Baird Concludes Successful Visit to Tripoli", Media Release No. 293 (October 11, 2011); Mike Blanchfield, "Baird Commits \$10-million Toward Recovering Gadhafi Weapons", *The Canadian Press* (October 11, 2011).

⁵⁹ United Nations Security Council Resolution 2017 (October 31, 2011), available at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/sc10429.doc.htm>

Finally, the West would be wise to maintain pressure on al Qaeda to ensure the organization cannot easily rebuild. Al Qaeda's leaders must be captured or killed and the organization continuously harassed. The US government has revealed its intention to do so by significantly increasing its drone warfare capability in Yemen and Somalia, which it will use to launch a campaign of targeted killings like the one it began in Pakistan in 2008. This makes strategic sense; keeping al Qaeda's leaders and foot soldiers on the run will help sap the organization's strength. Already, the drone program is bearing fruit; on September 30, 2011, AQAP's al-Awlaki was killed in Yemen. In Africa, Canada can play a role by assisting regional states in locating and eliminating al Qaeda's training facilities and safe havens, a recommendation Fowler suggests can be done with little threat to civilians. Canada "achieved effective results in Libya," he notes, "and such an operation in the Sahara ought to be feasible." We could do so without a heavy military footprint; Fowler suggests we offer "focused assistance" to African states that request Canadian support in combatting al Qaeda.⁶¹ Similarly, NATO and its allies must not conflate bin Laden's death with victory in Afghanistan. Departing Afghanistan (or for that matter, Iraq) prematurely or leaving too few soldiers on the ground to consolidate hard-fought gains risks giving al Qaeda and its allies too much room to manoeuvre. Any exit strategy must ensure that local police and military forces are able and willing to fill the security void Western forces will leave. For Canada, which has already begun withdrawing its combat forces from Afghanistan, ensuring other security personnel, like trainers and advisors, are in place and prepared to train Afghan security personnel is critical.

The bottom line is that al Qaeda's future does not rest in its hands alone. How Western countries respond to al Qaeda's setbacks will help define how the organization itself is able to rebound. If Canada and its allies build on recent counterterrorism successes, like the elimination of bin Laden, they will further weaken the organization's capabilities. And if they can help consolidate democratic gains in the Arab and Muslim world they will have eliminated al Qaeda's broader regional appeal. But if the West instead uses bin Laden's death to prematurely declare victory over al Qaeda or if it fails to properly nurse the evolving Arab Spring, it will have given al Qaeda and its regional affiliates and allies all the reason to welcome, rather than fear, the future.

⁶⁰ UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, "UN Security Council Passes Resolution 2017 on Counter Proliferation in Libya", Media Release, October 31, 2011; *The Local*, "Germany Offers Help Finding Libyan Weapons", November 1, 2011; *Associated Press*, "US is Paying European Teams to Hunt Stray Munitions in Libya" (June 17, 2011); Devon Maylie, "Alarm over Smuggled Libyan Arms", *Wall Street Journal* (November 12, 2011).

⁶¹Allan Woods, "Time for Canada to Help Target African Terrorists, Veteran Diplomat Says", *Toronto Star* (November 8, 2011).



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