

## Power Voids and Vacuums in the Middle East: A Recipe for a Stronger al-Qaeda? By Craig Phillips

It is easy to understand why many Americans might feel a little uneasy about the unrest in the Middle East. It may be that these revolutions affect more than oil prices and the deceleration of global growth going forward. It is not difficult to imagine oil embargoes, failed nation states, and hostile fundamentalists seizing control in the near future.

Thus far this has not been the case. The demographic at the core of most of the uprisings have largely been led by young idealists who rally via Facebook and are inspired by democracy. In fact, the core of the unrest has been secular in nature.

Consider Libya's transitional national council that includes secular liberals, Islamists, and some veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. The Egyptian branch of The Muslim Brotherhood is encouraging a multiparty democracy while disavowing violence.

Historically, Muslims have not encouraged the separation of religion and state. The younger Arabs behind these revolts are largely better educated than the previous generation of Arabs. They are also more synchronized with the modern world as can be seen by the use of Twitter and Facebook to organize the protests. If this younger generation desires a pluralistic society where religious devotion can be mixed with an electoral voice and economic freedom, then they only have to look to Turkey, Malaysia, or Indonesia as models. These countries have shown that Islam and democracy can co-exist. So far, it appears as if Iran's ideal theocracy is not the model these groups are fighting to instate.

There are consequences for the parties involved. We are all well attuned to the battles that are being fought and the victims of war that are on both sides. We are less exposed to the internal conflict in these countries as civilians pick sides. In Libya, many attacks have been made against liquor stores, alleged brothels, and farmers accused of apostasy. These attacks are said to be the work of violent fundamentalists like the Salafists, but even their leaders are condemning this violent excess.

Ultimately, these uprisings have led to a level of cooperation between Western nations and jihadists that has not been seen since the arming of anti-Soviet groups in the 1980s. It would appear as if the current uprisings have been far more focused on local political change and civil freedoms than they have been on partnering with al-Qaeda in their conquest against the Western societies. Many powerful groups that could have the ability to change this sway have sworn their allegiance to the new governments that are being set up as opposed to fighting for control themselves. This can be seen with the Libyan Islamic Movement, previously named The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group.

There is the possibility of an increase in this anti-western, pro al-Qaeda sentiment now that the U.S. has successfully killed Osama bin Laden. It is likely that there will be a backlash of some sort from the violent fundamentalists, bin Laden supporters, and even individuals who were embarrassed by the ease of entry when the U.S. military entered

Pakistani borders to conduct the operation. It is not likely that these kinds of consequences will be long lasting or have the influence to change the direction of the current uprisings.

It will be many years before this region is completely settled into their new forms of government and have the civil liberties comparable to Western nations, but it is a mistake to think that this will be a repeat of previous occurrences where failed states looked to al-Qaeda. In fact, it appears as if al-Qaeda has even gone as far as to denounce several of the uprisings and do not appear to be participating in others. We may be pleasantly surprised by the outcome of this current instability.