Al-Qaida, and a world in balance

Paul Rogers [1] 6 June 2011

Where is al-Qaida going after the Arab spring and the death of the movement's figurehead? The dynamics of global security in the 21st century offer an answer. The question is also one that the Pakistani journalist Syed Saleem Shahzad was investigating at the time of his shocking murder.

The condition of al-Qaida is a pressing concern as the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks approaches. A number of developments fuels the argument that the movement is in definite retreat, even facing a terminal crisis.

They include the killing of Osama bin Laden in a United States special-forces operation near Islamabad on 2 May 2011, echoed a month later by reports of that of the senior commander Ilyas Kashmiri in a drone-strike in South Waziristan; more generally, the revolts across the Arab world, whose keynote aspirations are very far from al-Qaida's Islamist ideology, show every sign of having surprised and bypassed the movement.

This argument is indeed one that the Barack Obama administration finds both persuasive and congenial. It sees the death of Osama bin Laden as an opportunity to reconfigure Afghanistan as less important to US security interests, progressively to withdraw tens of thousands of American troops from the country, and launch a presidential re-election campaign that highlights the president's success in extracting US forces from the painful entanglements in Iraq and Afghanistan (see "Al-Qaida and the Arab spring: after bin Laden", 5 May 2011).

The movement's lens

The actual role bin Laden was playing at the time of his death, and how central (or peripheral) he was in relation to al-Qaida's current activities, may be less clear than Washington implies or much of the American public believes. More important, the events of 2011 do not yet provide definitive evidence of the network's decline or of its inability to re-emerge in a new or adapted form. Indeed, it may even transpire that al-Qaida will come to be seen as a harbinger of a type of radical movement that could emerge more widely in the second decade of the 21st century.

The movement’s assets as well as its flaws are to a great degree encoded in its aims, which are worth recalling: the eviction of “crusader” (western) forces from the Islamic world; the termination of the House of Saud (regarded as especially corrupt, and violative of its role as keeper of Islam’s holy places) and of other regimes across the region; bitter hostility to the “Zionist entity”; and support for Islamist movements such as the separatists in southern Thailand and the southern Philippines.

In the context of a movement inspired (unusually) by religious beliefs whose eschatological dimension is measured in decades, these are short-term objectives; in al-Qaida’s mindset, the longer-term aim of establishing a radical Islamist caliphate may take a century.

Even in its relatively short life the movement has faced many setbacks in furthering these ambitions, such as great opposition to its brutal violence among the very people it seeks to rally (as in Iraq) and resistance to the rigid doctrinal model it espouses. It has also been further dispersed and damaged by US forces’ night-raids and drone-attacks of the kind said to have killed Ilyas Kashmiri.

At the same time al-Qaida has proved capable of spreading beyond its original heartlands and finding space to operate in (for example) Yemen, Somalia, and north Africa, and has benefited indirectly from the failure to advance an agreement over Palestine. Its resilience is also seen in the bloody assaults it has launched in Pakistan since the leader’s demise, which may be
followed by more Taliban operations (including infiltration and assassination) during the summer fighting season across the border in Afghanistan.

The global picture

The greatest strategic threat al-Qaida looks to be facing is indeed the Arab spring (even though Osama bin Laden, in one of his last statements, sought to endorse [14] the popular insurgency). It follows that the failure of the protest wave and the reassertion [15] of autocracy could open renewed space for a radical Islamist option to grow (see Khaled Hroub, "The Arab revolutions and al-Qaida [16]", 23 May 2011).

Any such pattern of events will take time to emerge, and it is in a longer-term context - of two or more decades - that al-Qaida’s significance and impact may become clear. Many previous columns [17] in this series have made the case that the main global-security challenges of the early-to-mid-21st century will stem [18] from an economically polarised and ecologically constrained world - where these problems, in combination with welcome improvements in education and communications, provoke frequent “revolts from the margins” (see "A world on the edge [19]", 29 January 2009).

The response to these outbreaks, which have deep roots in desperate but knowledgeable communities, will be attempts to reinstate strict control [20]. Many of the techniques developed in the “war on terror”, including armed-drones, will be used to protect [21] the billion-plus inhabitants of the planet who have gained from the neo-liberal economic system established since the 1980s.

It is not yet clear whether a morphed version of al-Qaida will be an agent (and thus a continued target) in this pattern of revolt. A more indicative present-day insurgency could be the neo-Maoist Naxalite rebellion in India, which already wields great influence across much of the country’s east-central belt (see "India’s 21st-century war [22]", 5 November 2009). It is too early to be prescriptive: both the new movements and the state responses will evolve. What can be said is that just as drones, night-raids and precision-guided weapons have changed the nature of the “war on terror” over its first decade, so paramilitary radicals will learn from their own experience and that of their adversaries (see “America’s military: failures of success [23]", 12 May 2011).

The model of change

If the Arab spring were to result in the creation of a just social and political order, and if a fair Palestinian settlement could be achieved, then the prospects for al-Qaida and similar Islamist movements would be greatly diminished. At present, the repression in Bahrain [24] and Syria [25], the conflict [26] in Libya, and the lack of progress around Israel-Palestine, make such outcomes harder [27] to envisage. Yet even if the popular pressures for change were to succeed and transform the region, the new governing systems would still have to cope [28] with deep-seated worldwide trends towards environmental limits and greater socio-economic division (see "The global crisis: from Cairo to Davos [29]", 3 February 2011).

Such unavoidable realities necessitate radical change towards emancipated and sustainable economies, in the wider context of a sustainable approach [30] to security (see, for example, the New Economic Foundation’s "great transition [31]" project, and the Oxford Research Group’s "sustainable security [32]" initiative).

That transition has to be achieved in the 2010s if deep instability in the 2020s and 2030s is to be avoided. In its absence, the experience of “revolts from the margins” (such as the Naxalites [33]) in the century’s first decade will by 2030-40 come to be seen as early symptoms of what will become pervasive realities.

In this analytical and historical frame [34], al-Qaida - albeit deriving from religious rather than socio-economic margins - may come to be viewed differently: less as a millenarian force whose individual adherents are willing to sacrifice themselves in pursuit of a dangerous trans-human vision, more as an exemplar of the sort of current that a fractured [35] and embittered world can generate from within a hard-held belief system. In this sense, al-Qaida may both be in decline and yet be still
to witness the moment of its greatest impact.

**A single death: Syed Saleem Shahzad**

The kidnapping and murder [36] of the Pakistani journalist Syed Saleem Shahzad is terribly tragic for his family and friends and shocking for everyone who wants to see Pakistan and Afghanistan have some chance of a peaceful future. His writings [37] for the *Asia Times* were read throughout the world and I have quoted his work scores of times in these columns [17] over the last ten years.

He brought to his work [38] a deep knowledge of the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban, al-Qaida and other armed opposition groups, as well as of the workings of the Pakistani state, the army and especially the ISI. What was really remarkable about Syed Saleem Shahzad was his extraordinary combination of tenacity and courage. His loss [39] is very difficult to exaggerate. He will be hugely missed.

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**Sidebox:**  
Paul Rogers is professor in the department of peace studies [40] at Bradford University, northern England. He is openDemocracy's international-security editor, and has been writing a weekly column on global security since 28 September 2001; he also writes a monthly briefing for the Oxford Research Group [47]. His books include *Why We're Losing the War on Terror* [48](Polity, 2007), and *Losing Control: Global Security in the 21st Century* [20](Pluto Press, 3rd edition, 2010)

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Paul Rogers is professor in the department of peace studies at Bradford University, northern England. He is openDemocracy's international security adviser, and has been writing a weekly column on global security since 28 September 2001; he also writes a monthly briefing for the Oxford Research Group. His latest book is Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threat from the Margins (IB Tauris, 2016), which follows Why We’re Losing the War on Terror (Polity, 2007), and Losing Control: Global Security in the 21st Century (Pluto Press, 3rd edition, 2010). He is on Twitter at: @ProfPRogers [69]

A lecture by Paul Rogers, delivered to the Food Systems Academy in late 2014, provides an overview of the analysis that underpins his openDemocracy column. The lecture - "The crucial century, 1945-2045: transforming food systems in a global context" - focuses on the central place of food systems in human security worldwide. Paul argues that food is the pivot of humanity's next great transition. It can be accessed here [71]

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