

**Statement before the House Homeland Security,
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence,**

***“UNREST IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH
AFRICA: RAMIFICATIONS FOR U.S. HOMELAND
SECURITY”***

A Statement by

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Unrest in the Middle East and North Africa: Ramifications for U.S. Homeland Security

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Chairman Meehan, Ranking Member Speier, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. The past several months have brought extraordinary change to the Middle East and North Africa, and it is most appropriate that we examine how a broad array of political, social, and economic transformations in the region may affect U.S. national interests, particularly as these interests relate to homeland security and counterterrorism.

Context is important when considering how unrest in the Middle East and North Africa will influence al Qaeda specifically and Islamist terrorism generally. It makes little sense to talk in vague terms about recent events signaling the demise or revival of al Qaeda in the region, because al Qaeda and its affiliates differ significantly based on the local environments in which they operate and the local grievances that drive their agendas. I commend the Committee for framing today's hearing in a manner that allows for discussion of specific countries, and in this vein, I will begin my remarks by examining the terrorism dimensions at play in Libya, Egypt, and Yemen, respectively.

As Committee members and my fellow witnesses also know, al Qaeda senior leadership has proven time and again to be a creative and adaptive adversary; where chaos exists, so too does opportunity. Given al Qaeda's transnational operations and aspirations, I will conclude my remarks with some broader observations about the implications that today's unrest have for U.S. counterterrorism strategies in the Middle East and North Africa.

Terrorism Concerns in Libya, Egypt, and Yemen

Concerns over terrorism underpin one of the most pressing questions surrounding U.S. and NATO involvement in Libya: whether the Obama administration and its European counterparts should more actively support rebel forces in their bid to depose Col. Muammar al-Qaddafi. Much remains unknown about the rebels and their political organization, the Transitional National Council. Still, there have been reports that at least some members of the opposition forces are affiliated with al Qaeda. This fact raises some important considerations for U.S. and NATO policy in Libya.

First and foremost is the possibility that al Qaeda elements could seize power in a post-Qaddafi, putatively rebel-led, Libyan government. Fortunately, the rebel movement appears diverse enough to forestall this possibility. A far more realistic possibility is that a protracted Libyan civil war may produce sufficient chaos to allow for the development of legitimate terrorist cells in the eastern part of the country. Al Qaeda and its allies notoriously exploit territories with weak central governments, carving out physical safe havens that facilitate training and operational planning. A chief concern is that Algerian-based al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a formal al Qaeda affiliate, might team up with Libyan rebel factions sympathetic to terrorism. Even absent coordination with an al Qaeda affiliate like AQIM, nascent terrorist cells in eastern Libya still could further destabilize already turbulent North Africa by creating a new base of support within the larger al Qaeda movement. Finally, given the recent history of Libyan extremists traveling to Iraq as foreign fighters, the growth of terrorist cells in the eastern part of Libya could mean another influx of foreign fighters into other conflict zones across the region.

As if deciphering rebel intentions were not enough, there are also concerns about whether Qaddafi might return to terrorism should he maintain his rule. In his lengthy reign, Qaddafi has been implicated in state-sponsored terrorism on multiple occasions, as with the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103. In recent years, he has combatted Islamist terrorism within Libyan borders, often working in harmony with Western goals. But now that hostilities have reignited between Qaddafi and the West, it is entirely conceivable that the Libyan leader may abandon that sort of cooperation should he remain in power.

These facts suggest few appealing options for U.S. counterterrorism policy as it relates to broader Western strategies in Libya. Despite his about-face on combatting terrorism within Libya, Qaddafi's recent actions make his long-term presence in the country untenable. Even though the U.S. and NATO do not seem to be currently discussing military operations in terms of regime change, we should not be surprised to see Western policy ultimately evolve to include a broader set of options for removing Qaddafi from power. Until then, deliberative action—like that currently being pursued by the U.S. and NATO—offers the surest course to mitigating terrorism risks in Libya.

Officials understand that any sort of ground invasion would only serve to fuel al Qaeda's toxic narrative of a war between the West and Islam. Al Qaeda uses this narrative as a major recruiting tool, so the Obama administration has been smart to reject outright the idea of large-scale intervention. In deploying force, the U.S. and NATO have also wisely resisted calls to immediately arm rebel forces. Officials may eventually decide that this is the right course of action; until then, the no-fly zone is buying time for authorities to learn more about the makeup and goals of the rebel forces, which is essential to do before arming any group of militants with possible terrorist connections.

Egypt, meanwhile, faces a much different set of issues than does its neighbor to the west. While terrorism-related concerns in Libya center on a largely-unknown threat, those in Egypt are focused squarely on the role that the Muslim Brotherhood is likely to play in a post-Mubarak government and society. The uprisings in Egypt have been met with public concern over the possibility that the Muslim Brotherhood, one of the world's oldest, largest, and most influential Islamist political groups, might come to control political affairs in Cairo. These fears are founded

on the Brotherhood's historical ties to terrorism and the organization's belief in *Sharia*, or Islamic law.

Still, the Muslim Brotherhood long ago renounced violence, and the organization has an antagonistic relationship with al Qaeda, especially its number two in command, Ayman al Zawahiri, himself an Egyptian. Were the Muslim Brotherhood to gain actual power in Egypt, it would face the burden of governing in a society that is now demanding jobs, reliable services, and openness in government, the same underlying demands that ignited the revolution. It is reasonable to expect that this burden to govern would temper the Brotherhood's Islamist political ambitions. Finally, the Egyptian military remains firmly entrenched, and is likely to cede power to elected civilians only through a gradual process of reforms. It is hard to imagine a situation in which the Egyptian military would abide a civilian government, especially one controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood, which moved to become a state sponsor of terrorism.

A more serious terrorism threat is posed by the categorical release of thousands of Egyptian prisoners, some of whom have extremist connections, over the past few months. In early March, it was reported that as many as 17,000 prisoners had been freed since Egypt's uprisings began.¹ While there are no reliable statistics on what percentage of these individuals are tied to terrorism, there have been reports of former prisoners associated not just with the Muslim Brotherhood, but also with Hamas and Hezbollah. The impact of categorical prison releases, then, may be felt not just in Egypt but in the larger region, in places like Israel and Lebanon, as recently-freed militants reconstitute connections with known terrorist groups or forge new partnerships.

Many of the fears surrounding prison releases in Egypt stem from the recent experience in Yemen, the third country under consideration at today's hearing. A February 2006 prison break in Sana'a freed a number of jailed militants, injecting key leaders into al Qaeda's efforts to reconstitute its capabilities on the Arabian Peninsula. The prison break ultimately facilitated the unification of disparate Saudi and Yemeni terrorist cells under the banner of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in 2009. Today AQAP is considered one of the most lethal al Qaeda affiliates; the group's potential for regional and global attacks helps explain why so many counterterrorism experts view political instability in Yemen as one of the most challenging developments in the Middle East and North Africa.

Growing protests against the rule of President Ali Abdullah Saleh pose legitimate questions about how AQAP might take advantage of regime change in Yemen. Saleh and his security services have been the lynchpin of U.S. counterterrorism strategy in Yemen, especially since the 2009 "Christmas Day" plot, after which the Obama administration doubled counterterrorism assistance to the government in Sana'a. As such, recent commentary on Yemen's political crisis has tended to focus on the risks inherent in a Saleh resignation—specifically, that AQAP would enjoy even more freedom to operate.

I would argue that political upheaval in Yemen is a concern with regard to AQAP irrespective of any damage done by the removal of Saleh. It is not at all clear that the Yemeni president has been an effective partner in combatting terrorism. One Middle East observer recently noted that

¹ Michael Scheuer, "Why the Mideast revolts will help al-Qaeda," *Washington Post*, March 4, 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/03/04/AR2011030402322.html>.

the Sana'a government has "failed to kill or capture a single al Qaeda leader in the last two years."² Instead, the regime has directed much of its attention to Yemen's other security challenges, which include an insurgency in the north and a separatist movement in the south. As Saleh has remained preoccupied with these domestic battles, Yemen's economy, which already was facing looming natural resource shortages, has continued its nosedive.

Yemen's litany of political, social, and economic challenges, combined with AQAP's growing strength, means that there are no easy counterterrorism solutions to be had in the country. To the greatest extent possible, the U.S. must engage local Yemenis directly affected by AQAP's activities, and not just the government in Sana'a, in an attempt to isolate AQAP. Beyond the limited scope of counterterrorism operations, the U.S. and its partners must address the underlying political, social, and economic sources of Yemen's instability; doing so will have the greatest long-term impact in mitigating extremist violence in the country. Working through entities like "Friends of Yemen," a collection of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members and Western nations, will be essential to success in this endeavor. For example, Saudi Arabia channels up to \$2 billion per year in development aid to Yemen; the United Arab Emirates contributed just under \$1 billion last year. These countries can prove particularly helpful in implementing political and socioeconomic reforms, given their deep ties to Yemen's people and institutions.

Broader Considerations for U.S. Counterterrorism Policy in the Middle East and North Africa

While the cases of Libya, Egypt, and Yemen differ in significant ways, recent events in those three countries suggest some broader considerations for U.S. counterterrorism policy in the Middle East and North Africa. In discussing how terrorism threats intersect with regional unrest, there has been a tendency to worry about a terrorist "takeover" of certain governments or states. In reality, this should never have been the chief concern. Despite their potential for major attacks with destabilizing consequences, al Qaeda and its affiliates remain marginal movements within the Middle East and North Africa. The groups will never command anything close to the popular support necessary to govern a modern state.

Still, we should not underestimate al Qaeda's lethality and maniacal focus on attacking the United States and the West. Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations most stand to benefit from the emergence of chaotic, factious, or ungoverned territories, whereupon these groups seek to establish safe havens for training and operational planning. This was the case in Iraq in the mid-2000s, and it is the case in Yemen today. Outside the region, al Qaeda affiliates have taken advantage of political instability to establish training zones in places like northwestern Pakistan and Southeast Asia.

This trend has important implications for U.S. counterterrorism policy in the Middle East and North Africa today. American policy has long leveraged relationships with friendly autocrats in the region; these arrangements were thought to provide the stability necessary to ensure U.S. economic and security interests. Especially since 9/11, these partnerships have often produced

² Ellen Knickmeyer, "So Long, Saleh: Let's be honest: We don't need the Yemeni president to fight al Qaeda," *Foreign Policy*, February 10, 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/02/09/so_long_saleh?page=full.

tangible counterterrorism successes. At the same time, however, such policies have served as a key component of al Qaeda's ideology—that the U.S. is purportedly complicit in supporting so-called “apostate regimes” and denying freedoms to Muslim peoples. Furthermore, the recent uprisings have demonstrated that an over-reliance on autocrats can actually lead to great instability, just the opposite of what American policymakers seek.

We are now faced with a rare historical moment—and a strategic opportunity—in which the political, social, and economic aspirations of Middle East and North African publics are aligned more closely with U.S. interests than ever before. Long-term, the best deterrent to al Qaeda and other terrorist groups will be the development of stable, prosperous, and free societies in the Middle East and North Africa. That goal is far easier said than done, and how to formulate a comprehensive strategy is beyond the scope of my testimony. Still, I want to close by reflecting on one issue, in particular: the continued importance of U.S. engagement and investment in the region.

It may be tempting to view the recent uprisings, especially those against U.S.-backed authoritarian regimes, as a repudiation of American policy in the Middle East and North Africa. But such an assessment would miss an important part of the story. Here, it is helpful to reconsider Egypt. As mentioned earlier, the Egyptian military remains the one consistent, stabilizing force in the country, and is being relied upon to help implement progressive reforms. The military is in a position to guide the country through its present turmoil largely because of decades of U.S. and international bureaucratic and financial investment in Egypt's security structures. For the U.S., the problem in its policies toward Egypt has not been so much the fact of partnership with the ruling powers, but rather the decision not to make American support contingent on the implementation of gradual reforms in Egyptian society.

Libya and Yemen, on the other hand, demonstrate how a lack of long-term U.S. investment can limit American options in times of crisis. After successfully convincing Qaddafi to give up nuclear weapons in 2003, the U.S. had an opportunity to further cultivate its relationship with Libya around more than just a narrow counterterrorism construct. Enhanced engagement with Tripoli could have included a major push for political, social, and economic reforms. Instead, an opportunity was missed and the U.S. is now forced to confront a chaotic, war-torn Libya. In Yemen, the U.S. has stepped up its engagement in recent years, but problems of the magnitude that Yemen faces require a comprehensive, long-term strategy for engagement with meaningful investments in political, social, and economic reforms. To this end, the U.S. must work with those partners that have a vested interest in regional stability, especially GCC members.

Right now, the Obama administration has a narrow window in which to better align U.S. counterterrorism goals with the aspirations of millions of Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa. The key to doing this will be in understanding that security assistance and liberalization are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary. I want to thank the Committee for inviting me to testify today, and look forward to taking your questions.