

Committee on Homeland Security's Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence

Hearing on

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

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Written Testimony of

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Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, I want to thank you for asking me to testify today.

Understandably, there is widespread trepidation about the events unfolding in the Middle East. Many fear that the removal of the region's longstanding leaders will lead to something worse – that is, the rise of al Qaeda or like-minded organizations. However, while there is always potential for al Qaeda to take advantage of political instability, we should not view recent developments as purely a contest between dictators (or autocrats) and jihadists. From Yemen to Tunisia, there are other political actors struggling for a say in how their country is run. It is important that America and the West embrace these people and lend them support where appropriate.

After all, the current unrest was not started by al Qaeda, or any other malevolent actor. It began when a Tunisian street merchant set himself on fire to protest harassment by the local police. The mass protests that followed have exposed a fundamental truth about the Middle East that is often missed: The region's regimes were not stable because there are millions of Muslims who do not wish to live under an autocracy.

This is an important observation to keep in mind when discussing America's counterterrorism efforts. For too long, policymakers have assumed that unequivocal support for men such as Hosni Mubarak is our only option. But it is obvious now that relying on such leaders is not a viable long-term solution. The faux stability of Mubarak's regime was, for instance, swept away in just a few short weeks after decades of rule.

With that perspective in mind, there certainly are bad actors who seek to capitalize on the unrest. Below, I will briefly outline some of the issues that may arise, from a counterterrorism perspective.

Libya

The Libyan opposition is comprised of various interests and personalities, many of whom are secular-minded and no friend to al Qaeda.

The most worrisome rebels, however, are located in eastern Libya. The city of Derna, in particular, is a known jihadist hotspot and contributed a large number of fighters to the Iraqi insurgency. Derna's rebel forces are currently led by three former members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), a known al Qaeda affiliate.¹ And the man who is reportedly training Derna's rebels, Sufyan Ben Qumu, was formerly held at Guantanamo.² In declassified memos prepared at Guantanamo, U.S. officials alleged that Qumu joined al Qaeda in the early

¹ Charles Levinson, "Ex-Mujahedeen Help Lead Libyan Rebels," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 2, 2001. The article is available online here: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703712504576237042432212406.html>

² Thomas Joscelyn, "Ex-Gitmo detainee training Libyan rebels in Derna," *The Long War Journal*, April 2, 2011. The article is available online here: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/04/ex-gitmo_detainee_tr.php

1990s, after leaving the Libyan Army, and spent the next decade serving the jihadist terror network in various capacities.³

As the U.S. and NATO move forward, extreme caution should be exercised when dealing with the Derna faction of the Libyan rebellion. Every effort should be made to minimize their role in shaping Libya's political future. And that is assuming the rebels can even overtake Col. Muammar Qaddafi, which is far from a certainty at this point.

A wounded Qaddafi could easily turn to terrorism to punish those who opposed him, both at home and abroad. During the 1980s, Qaddafi was one of the world's foremost sponsors of terrorism. After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, some have looked upon Qaddafi as a partner against al Qaeda because the LIFG targeted his regime. It is true that Qaddafi and al Qaeda are not friends. But I would inject a note of caution here.

In 2003, Qaddafi successfully hired al Qaeda terrorists to kill Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah. Qaddafi and Abdullah had a televised shouting match concerning the war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. During the course of that argument, Abdullah insulted Qaddafi, which the Libyan dictator did not take lightly. His intelligence operatives reached out to a contact living in the U.S. who successfully brokered a deal with al Qaeda operatives living in the UK to kill Abdullah. Libyan intelligence officers and an al Qaeda cell were caught in Saudi Arabia as they planned the operation.⁴

This example is an important reminder that Qaddafi is willing and able to use terrorism to punish his perceived enemies. We should expect nothing less from a dictator who ordered the downing of Pan-Am 103 in 1988.

Yemen

Of all the countries currently in turmoil, al Qaeda is strongest in Yemen. As Obama administration officials have rightly noted, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is the most dangerous al Qaeda affiliate outside of South Asia. The failed Christmas Day 2009 terrorist attack and a host of other plots have demonstrated the group's capability and intent.

In order to counter AQAP's growing threat, America has partnered with Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who came into power in 1978 and has led a united Yemen since 1990. But President Saleh is an uneven and duplicitous partner in the fight against terrorism.

On the one hand: Saleh's regime provides some valuable intelligence against al Qaeda; provides cover for unpopular American airstrikes; and Yemeni government forces have fought against al Qaeda operatives. On the other hand: Saleh refused to take action against Sheikh Abdul Majeed al Zindani after Zindani was designated an al Qaeda supporter by the U.S. and UN in 2004; Al Qaeda operatives have repeatedly been let out of prison or "escaped"; Saleh's government vocally supported the Iraqi insurgency and, at a minimum, looked the other way as Yemenis

³ A copy of the declassified memos can be found online here:

<http://projects.nytimes.com/guantanamo/detainees/557-abu-sufian-ibrahim-ahmed-hamuda-bin-qumu/documents/5/pages/480>

⁴ Thomas Joscelyn, "The Libyan Terrorist: Muammar Qaddafi," WeeklyStandard.com, February 24, 2011. http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/libyan-terrorist-muammar-qaddafi_552474.html

went off to fight American forces; and Saleh has allowed terrorist organizations such as Hamas to operate in the open.

Thus, President Saleh is far from an ideal partner in the fight against terrorism. And in the nearly ten years since the September 11 terrorist attacks, al Qaeda has grown only stronger in Saleh's Yemen, not weaker.

Regardless, the U.S. government has partnered with Saleh because it fears that his replacement may be even worse. This is, in part, understandable. Jihadist organizations, including al Qaeda, have longstanding ties to Yemen's military establishment. For instance, General Ali Mohsen al Ahmar, who helped bring Saleh to power, backed Osama bin Laden for years and has been known to use jihadists in the fight against southern secessionists and Houthi rebels.⁵ If General al Ahmar, or someone like him, were to come to power, it is likely that the Yemeni government would be even less helpful. Similarly, if a member of Yemen's Islamist establishment were to assume Saleh's mantle, American interests would undoubtedly suffer in the near-term.

However, President Saleh's political power has always rested on his alliances with actors such as General al Ahmar and Sheikh Zindani, who is one of the heads of Yemen's Islah party, the main opposition party. As a matter of straightforward logic, Saleh could never be a true partner against such men, who have extensive terrorist ties, because they ensured his continued rule. Now that al Ahmar, Zindani, and other powerbrokers have repudiated Saleh, it remains to be seen what political capital Saleh has left. It may be the case that Saleh's days as Yemen's ruler are numbered in any event, in which case the U.S. government will find itself scrambling for a new partner.

Egypt

President Hosni Mubarak was a partner against al Qaeda and affiliated organizations. And the Egyptian military, which continues to play a large role in defining Egypt's politics, has no interest in seeing jihadist organizations take over the country. However, American counterterrorism efforts will likely be complicated should the Muslim Brotherhood assume a greater share of political power.

Muslim Brotherhood leaders openly advocate jihad, and have endorsed terrorist violence in Iraq and Afghanistan. Hamas, which was designated a terrorist organization in the mid-1990s, is a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood's founding father, Hassan al Banna, called on Muslims to embrace what he called the "Art of Death." He believed that Muslims should love death more than they love life. It is no surprise, then, that we find Muslim Brotherhood leaders justifying suicide bombings to this day. And, of course, Hamas regularly employs suicide bombings as a weapon.

⁵ See, for example: John F. Burns, "Yemen Links to bin Laden Gnaw at F.B.I. in Cole Inquiry," *The New York Times*, November 26, 2000.

Should the Egyptian military and Muslim Brotherhood enter some sort of power-sharing arrangement, it will undoubtedly complicate American counterterrorism efforts.

I look forward to discussing all of these topics, and more, during the hearing.