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TESTIMONY

Al Qaeda After Bin Laden

Implications for American Strategy

Addendum

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CT-365/1

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Document submitted on November 1, 2011 as an addendum to testimony presented before the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities on June 22, 2011

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Al Qaeda After Bin Laden
Implications for American Strategy
Addendum²

Before the Committee on Armed Services
Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities
United States House of Representatives

November 1, 2011

The subsequent questions and answers found in this document were received from the Committee for additional information following the hearing on June 22, 2011 and were submitted for the record.

Mr. Langevin:

What effect has the Arab Spring had on our counterterrorism efforts?

Mr. Jenkins:

Any assessment can be only provisional. The political upheaval that began with protests against governments in Tunisia and Egypt is unfinished business. Political and sectarian violence has recently flared up again in Egypt. Rebel forces have only recently toppled the Qaddafi regime in Libya; pockets of resistance remain. A standoff continues in Yemen, where President Ali Abdullah Saleh holds on to power. Protests continue in Syria; although many analysts see the Bashar al-Assad government as ultimately doomed, the regime gives no indication of yielding political power. The government of Iraq confronts a continued terrorist campaign; Sunnis and Shias remain divided. Sectarian tensions and political protests continue in Bahrain.

Even where governments have fallen, their successors are likely to face a variety of security challenges—riots, sectarian violence, continuing tribal conflict, sabotage by supporters of the old regimes, attacks by terrorists exploiting the chaos. It is difficult to foresee how things will turn out. The region will remain turbulent for many years.

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² This addendum is available for free download at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT365z1.html>.

The political protests have demonstrated al Qaeda's lack of popular appeal. Its ideology and terrorist methods were irrelevant to those demanding greater political freedom and more economic opportunities, not unending warfare against Western infidels or the restoration of a seventh-century caliphate. Nonetheless, the continuing turmoil has offered al Qaeda some immediate opportunities.

The turmoil in Egypt has been accompanied by an erosion of government authority in the Sinai, giving greater freedom of action to gangs of smugglers and radicalized Bedouin tribesmen. In Libya, jihadists, some possibly linked to al Qaeda, have gained influence and combat experience during the campaign against Qaddafi's forces, and there are concerns about disappearance of weapons from the dictator's arsenals. Al Qaeda and like-minded jihadists have exploited the chaos in Yemen to expand their stronghold. Veterans of Iraq's jihadist-led insurgency may see fertile ground in Syria's internal conflict.

Al Qaeda has adjusted its messaging to address the new circumstances. It has firmly aligned itself with the uprisings while interpreting events in the context of its own struggle. It has asserted that the 9/11 attacks paved the way for the popular rebellion. The downfall of despised enemies and godless tyrants like Hosni Mubarak, Muammar Qaddafi, and Ali Saleh, according to al Qaeda, represent not just popular victories, but continuing defeats of America, which, in al Qaeda-speak, depended on these corrupt lackeys to suppress Islam. Ignoring the absence of any manifest pro-jihadist sentiments during the protests, al Qaeda has congratulated itself and all of its devout believers on their success, urging them now to reject secularism and demand the imposition of Sharia as the source of all law.

The uprisings have produced high expectations of political and economic progress, but the transition from authoritarian regimes with narrow to nonexistent political participation to functioning democracies will be long and difficult. Inevitably, there will be disappointment and disillusion. Al Qaeda already has positioned itself to exploit any future frustrations, warning that America will try to undermine the will of the people and impose secular regimes. And if, in the long run, nascent democracies are crushed and authoritarian governments return to power, terrorists will find new recruits.

These developments will affect American policy—and specifically, America's counterterrorist efforts. Although the United States clearly welcomes the spread of freedom, people in the region still associate this country with support for the fallen regimes, which were America's principal allies in counterterrorist efforts. American cooperation with the security forces of embattled regimes like that in Yemen continues, as evidenced in the recent operation that killed al Qaeda

leader Anwar al-Awlaki. It will be a major challenge for the United States to preserve the cooperation of the local security services in efforts to combat terrorism without being seen as an accomplice of oppression.

The Arab Spring has opened the political space for movements of all stripes—Islamists, nationalists, communists, and others—to compete, but the United States tends to focus its concern exclusively on the Islamist parties, fearing that they are less compatible with democracy and may possibly open the way for Islamist extremism. Without allowing America’s own commitment to democracy to ignore developments that run counter to U.S. interests, the United States will have to become more discerning in its assessment of the multiplying Islamist movements. Not all Islamists are al Qaeda’s allies, even though al Qaeda may pretend that they are.

In dealing with the new governments in the region, the United States also must realize that counterterrorism is not likely to be at the top of their agendas. Maintaining political stability, drafting new constitutions, holding elections, improving the economy, and creating jobs are more likely to occupy their immediate attention. Al Qaeda terrorists may be seen by them as a distant danger. Counterterrorism, therefore, cannot be the exclusive framework for American foreign policy or the sole currency of American discourse.