

“From Arab Spring to Arab Winter”

Featuring
Peter Bergen
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Three and one-half years after the advent of the *Arab Spring* - i.e. tumultuous popular revolts against long-standing authoritarian leaders in a number of Middle Eastern countries - original hopes have been dashed.

- American experts had hoped that with less repression, citizens would have outlets for self-expression and be less driven toward violent acts preferred by extremist groups such as al Qaeda.
- Osama bin Laden had hoped that despotic/secular/US-dependent rulers would be chased from the scene, leaving space for his vision of political Islam.

Part of the bin Laden strategy, starting in the 1990s, was to wage war on the U.S., hitting its high point on 9/11.

- Seeing the U.S. as a *paper tiger* (Vietnam, Beirut and Somalia), he expected the infliction of such pain to prompt the US withdrawal from the Middle East, thus hastening the vulnerability and demise of authoritarian regimes there as well as Israel.

Mr. Bergen assessed that what seems to be resulting from the Arab Spring, instead of newly accountable governance, are chaotic versions of the familiar. For example:

- Egypt had a popularly elected Muslim Brotherhood ousted by a military coup; and is now in the midst of a low-grade civil war.
- Yemen is wracked with extremely severe socio-economic problems.
- And Syria is worse off than even Iraq has been in recent years.

Extremist groups are thriving in this lawless environment, including al Qaeda affiliates in Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula, the African Maghreb, and elsewhere.

Syria is playing the role Afghanistan did under Soviet occupation, as the magnet and proving ground for foreign jihadist fighters.

- Regional states' leaders fear further destabilization as hardened jihadist fighters who had earned their spurs in Syria eventually return home.

There is some relatively good news for the United States in all this misfortune.

- Al Qaeda affiliates tend to have local-regional aims, rather than ones of global reach involving the American homeland.

Additionally, the terror of global reach embodied by al Qaeda *Central* in Afghanistan-Pakistan has been largely dismantled.

- Like Pearl Harbor, 9/11 was a tactical success but a strategic failure.
 - Due to institutional responses, such as the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, and counter-terrorism vigilance broadly, the U.S. is a much harder target than it was in 2001.

Americans may have consequential threats about which to be concerned - such as cyber-attacks - but a 9/11 redux does not appear to be high on the list.

Paul F. Herman, Jr.
Florida State College at Jacksonville