Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Implications of the Arab Spring for the UK Government's Counter Terrorism Strategy

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2011 has been a momentous year, seeing a confluence of events in North Africa and the Middle East historic in their sweep and significance. The eruption of democracy movements is, even in its early stages, the most important development of the early 21st century, with potential long term consequences greater than either 9/11 or the global financial crisis in 2008. An historic change which at its core, is about the people of the region demanding their legitimate rights and dignity.

It is a moment of huge opportunity for the people of the Middle East and North Africa to build more open societies based on the rule of law, with greater access to justice, political freedom and economic opportunity.

At the same time, a decade from the 9/11 attacks, we have also seen the death of Usama Bin Laden, and Al Qaida under more pressure than at any point in their history.

As Foreign Office Minister for both the Middle East, and Counter Terrorism, I have had a privileged view of events which arguably may define the landscape in the region for generations to come.

In my brief remarks this lunchtime, I won’t attempt to range over events which will no doubt engage historians for decades. But rather I’d like to focus on a specific area, which is: the implications of the Arab Spring for HMG’s counter-terrorism efforts, some of which are short term and more tactical, others are more fundamental to our enduring national security.

Arab Spring.

Many of the North African and Middle Eastern regimes affected by the Arab Spring kept a brutal grip over their populations - developing disproportionately large and powerful intelligence and security structures. Structures that were often brutally effective at managing the terrorist threat from within their borders.

In many respects the Arab Spring was a direct reaction to this type of authoritarian rule, and the police and intelligence services were among the first institutions to be dismantled in the face of overwhelming popular protest.

Short term

In the short term, the collapse of the security machinery may present some opportunities for terrorist groups to exploit. We should keep this in perspective, but we must continue to be watchful. In Libya, whilst are working with the NTC to secure arms and ammunitions dumps, we have seen indications that Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb has used the chaos to procure weapons, and has attempted, unsuccessfully, to conduct attacks in Tunisia. In Egypt, as the security apparatus is dismantled and re-forms, and as regimes look to establish themselves, there will be an inevitable period during which local security services are less able to deal effectively with terrorism.

Addressing these vulnerabilities makes CT relationships a vital part of our engagement in the region, and we will continue to work with local police, and security services to try and prevent terrorist attacks. The choice for us is not whether or not to reengage - but the extent of and nature of that relationship.

A key focus of our wider efforts to support new regimes is to help them rebuild their CT and security sectors in a way which makes them compliant with international human rights standards and democratic norms. But most importantly, that they represent the rebalancing of power away from the shadowy world of intelligence and security, towards the people themselves.

As the Foreign Secretary has put it:

“If the Arab Spring does lead to more open and democratic societies across the Arab world over a number of years, it will be the greatest advance for human rights and freedom since the end of the Cold War. If it does not lead to these things, we could see a collapse back into more authoritarian regimes, conflict and increased terrorism in North Africa on Europe’s very doorstep”.

The potential prize and the consequences of failure are enormous.

Our relationship with Arab regimes

Much opprobrium has been directed at Western governments, the UK included - for working with authoritarian regimes, sometimes very closely, prior to the Arab Spring. And it is right that our relationships are subject to scrutiny both of substance and tone.

I think we should note, however, that most of the terrorist threats to the UK and our interests emanate from or have strong links overseas.

To be able to investigate and disrupt these threats means that we have to work with regimes which may not share our standards or values. Sometimes, this means working with local security services to improve their counter-terrorism capabilities - so that they are better able

to manage the threat within their own borders. Or helping to improve their practises so that we are better able to work with them.

The extent of that cooperation, and the type of assistance we choose to provide, is subject to close attention and often finely balanced judgement- often our options are, necessarily, severely limited.

It is worth remembering though, that it is often the strength of the CT relationships that we are able to establish with countries around the world that stands between us and a successful attack: for example, it was information provided by Saudi Arabia that disrupted last year's

AQ-AP printer bomb plot.

What we can do is ensure that, wherever possible, the assistance we provide - be that equipment or training - will not be used for internal repression, and that the nature of our relationships remains true to our own values, principles and indeed legal obligations. This is a commitment that runs throughout our published CT strategy, CONTEST - and is particularly important now, after the Arab Spring.

The Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary have also made it abundantly clear the standards they expect in the conduct of our foreign affairs and in how our intelligence and security services operate. Which is why in the early weeks of being in Government, the PM announced an independent inquiry by Sir Peter Gibson into the UK's involvement with detainees in overseas counter-terrorism operations. And why clear guidance has now been published on how to deal with detainees held by other countries.

Al Qaida

But what of Al Qaida's role?

They too have been surprised by the scale and speed of events - and have failed to have any significant bearing on the Arab Spring. The popular and largely peaceful protests that swept across the Arab world were the most obvious refutation of a core tenet of AQ's ideology, that change can only be brought about by violent jihad.

These popular, peaceful protests have already achieved more in a short few months - against deeply entrenched regimes - than AQ's 23 year campaign of violence.

Death of UBL

Against this backdrop, the death of UBL was another hugely significant moment. The analysts may disagree over his precise role within the organisation at the time of his death, but what is certain is that he was AQ's totem and figurehead. In a short space of time, a core tenet of

AQ’s ideology was refuted in the most emphatic terms, and their leader and inspiration was killed.

The leadership of AQ is now weaker than at any point. It played no role in recent political change in North Africa and the Middle East. Its ideology has been widely discredited. Further international pressure can reduce its capability still further. But AQ continues to pose a threat, and groups affiliated to AQ - notably in Yemen and Somalia - have emerged to be a substantial threat in their own right, and we have seen recently with the attack by Boko Haram against the UN compound in Nigeria that the threat continues to evolve.

This is why, in spite of the significant events of 2011, we cannot for a moment afford to be complacent about terrorism. And why, in this 10th anniversary year, we must redouble our CT efforts. This requires a global effort, hard security, as well as support for popular reform in the

Arab World.

Al Qaida’s inability to influence events in North Africa and the Middle East is probably a true reflection of their legitimacy and level of support. But we must be mindful that AQ are not allowed to shape the next stage; that the passion for reform shown by people across the region is not allowed to spoil; and that their expectations can be matched by the new regimes giving them the freedoms and choice that they demand.

Conclusion: Long term Security

For this is the absolute core of the Arab Spring. This is what has the potential to elevate the events of 2011 to a similar plane as the collapse of communism. It is not an issue of what impact freer, more democratic Arab societies can have an Al Qaida’s fate - important though that is. But rather it is about the possibility of developing a far closer partnership with peoples on Europe’s doorstep, of greater social and economic exchange. It is the prospect of mutual security based not on hard security, but of shared values and common interest.

But these are Arab revolutions not ours. Change has been led by the people of the region and it is not for us to dictate the pace or nature of that change.

However, there is an important role for the UK to be play: to be clear about our values and support reformers in the region.

The response of governments must be non-violent. Leaders need to address the legitimate aspirations of the people of the region with reform, not repression. Where human rights are abused and lives are threatened we will not be silent bystanders. That is why in Libya, we acted swiftly to prevent the massacre of citizens in Benghazi. And in Syria, the EU has adopted additional sanctions on those responsible for, or associated with, the unacceptable and brutal repression we continue to witness there. These sanctions are targeted carefully

and designed to encourage President Assad and those around him to reject the use of violence and embrace genuine reform. We are also committed to increase pressure on the regime at the United Nations. The UN Security Council Presidential Statement issued on 3 August condemned the violence in Syria, but left the way open for a return to calling for a UNSCR. We will push again should we assess that there is need for one.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/implications-of-the-arab-spring-for-the-uk-governments-counter-terrorism-strategy