

The Impact of the Arab Awakening on Muslim Radicalization in Europe: A Preliminary Assessment (ARI)

*Lorenzo Vidino**

Theme: While it is premature to draw conclusions, there are reasons to believe that the events of the Arab Awakening are not triggering a wave of radicalisation among European Muslims but might actually decrease it.

Summary: This ARI looks at the implications of the events of the so-called Arab Awakening on violent radicalisation among European Muslim communities and, in particular, North African diaspora communities. While acknowledging that it is premature to draw any conclusions, it argues that while a small minority will still radicalise irrespective of the events taking place in the Arab world, the Arab Awakening has to some degree undermined al-Qaeda's message and deprived jihadists of much of their propaganda ammunition against the West. It then proceeds to analyse how different cross-sections of the diverse Islamist milieus throughout Europe have been reacting to the events. It argues that while several European-based Islamist groups are seeking to spin the events to their advantage, there is little evidence of their efforts gaining much traction. Yet, argues the paper, there are reasons to be concerned about potential negative developments.

Analysis: The events of the so-called Arab Awakening have taken the entire world by surprise, including the regimes targeted by the protests and, in most cases, the protesters themselves. In all countries affected in one way or the other by protests the situation is much too fluid to make any intelligent prediction of the short- and, let alone, long-term implications of such seismic events. Despite these difficulties, policymakers and security professionals throughout Europe are seeking to assess the repercussions of the events taking place throughout the Arab world not only for how they will affect their countries' policies in the region, but also over their potential impact on European Muslim communities and, in particular, North African diaspora communities. In particular, many policymakers are interested in seeing how the events of the Arab Awakening will impact the phenomenon of radicalisation among European Muslims and they are struggling to find telltale signs.

Despite the importance of the issue, assessing the phenomenon is a daunting task. European Muslims of North African origin are as shell-shocked and confused (yet at the same time, for the most part, excited) as their counterparts in their countries of origin. It is against this backdrop that any analysis of the implications of the events of the Arab Awakening on violent extremism in the North African diaspora communities in Europe

* *Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Security Studies, ETH Zürich.*

should be considered: it is too early to make any assumption and all scholars and analysts can do is make educated guesses.

Yet, notwithstanding this essential caveat, it is fair to timidly state that the impact of the Arab Awakening on violent extremism in Europe is arguably limited but possibly positive. The impact can be seen as limited because, although it is difficult to exactly ascertain the complex interaction of personal and structural factors that shape the process, it is arguable that, while global political events do matter, in many cases radicalisation is driven by personal factors. While it is impossible to determine it with absolute certainty and while every case is different, it seems reasonable to say that personal ambitions, some sense of disenfranchisement, group dynamics and other personal factors have played a larger role in the radicalisation process of many European Muslims than complex geopolitical dynamics. That is to say that small numbers of people will always radicalise irrespective of global political developments, even those of the magnitude of the Arab Awakening.

Moreover, the demographics of many North African Muslim communities in Europe should also be taken into consideration. In many European countries the majority of youths, the group most likely to embrace radical views, of North African descent are European-born and have often only limited ties to the country from which their parents or even grandparents came from. While many of them retain some emotional attachment to their ancestral lands, it is arguable that events taking place in their countries of birth or, more generally, worldwide, affect them more than events taking place in North Africa. Scholars are divided in identifying the factors leading people to radicalise, but several, predominantly French, experts have convincingly demonstrated that, among second and third generation European Muslims, search of identity plays a larger role in the radicalisation process than the impact of events taking place in countries with which they only have some indirect linkage.¹ Of course this analysis would not apply to first-generation immigrants, who still constitute the bulk of the North African population in countries like Spain and Italy and a significant cross-section in other European countries.

While the impact of events in North Africa on violent radicalisation in Europe might therefore be limited, it is also arguable that, at this point, there are reasons to think that they might actually decrease it. First, as much as it is a cliché that has been repeated ad nauseam by commentators, it seems apparent that, at least at this point, the events of the last few months have dealt a significant blow to al-Qaeda's narrative. Its main selling point—only violence can overthrow the authoritarian regimes of the region—has been disproved by events on the ground, as protesters in Tunisia and Egypt, while sharing none of its ideas and tactics, have achieved in a few months more than what al-Qaeda has in 20 years. Al-Qaeda and the global jihadist movement are struggling to find a response to the latest events and their attempts to frame them as a success of their movement seem very unconvincing. It is fair to say, as EUROPOL did in its latest annual report, that al-Qaeda-affiliated entities for the time being 'have been reduced to observers, incapable of influencing events in any significant fashion'.² The message is probably not lost on most European Muslims.

¹ See the works of Olivier Roy, Giles Kepel and Farhad Khosrokhavar.

² EUROPOL TE-SAT 2011, p. 19,

http://www.europol.europa.eu/publications/EU_Terrorism_Situation_and_Trend_Report_TE-SAT/TE-SAT2011.pdf.

Yet EUROPOL is also right in cautioning about potentially negative developments. The enthusiasm following the overthrow of Ben Ali and Mubarak has created enormous, arguably exaggerated, expectations in Tunisia, Egypt and, more broadly, the whole region. 'Should Arab expectations not be met', rightly warns EUROPOL, 'the consequence may be a surge in support for those terrorist organisations, and an increase in radicalisation, both in North Africa and elsewhere'.³ Al-Qaeda, like most terrorist organisations, is quintessentially opportunistic in nature, and could take advantage of the sense of disillusionment that almost inevitably will come in the next months.

Moreover, there is a chance that the almost bloodless revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt might be the exception and that other protest movements will be met with brutal force, like in Libya, Yemen and Syria. In these countries the confrontation can end in different ways. But particularly if the regimes were to gain the upper hand, these developments would bring new validity to al-Qaeda's message that only violence can bring about change. The point is also not lost on many European Muslims, including radical chat-room visitors who are posting threads like *Are the Protests in Syria doing anything?*⁴

Despite these potentially negative developments, the temporary defeat of al-Qaeda's message is apparent. Moreover, there is another arguably positive implication of the events of the Arab Awakening on radicalisation in Europe. Although its behaviour has not been immaculate and some criticism has been levelled at it from various quarters, it is fair to say that, generally speaking, the role of the West over the last few months has been seen relatively positively. Many have criticised the delayed support for the protest movement in Tunisia and Egypt and the selective support for it in other countries (military intervention in Libya, support but no intervention in Syria, only half-hearted support in Bahrain...). But, generally speaking, the West (which, of course, is an oversimplified concept, as various Western countries have acted in different ways) has not behaved in a way that has outraged and antagonised the majority of Muslims.

Unlike during other events of the past 20 years that, rightly or wrongly, have been perceived by many Muslims as proof of the West's antagonism or, at least, double-standards against Muslim-majority countries, its behaviour during the Arab Awakening is more difficult to characterise in negative terms. The lack of intervention in Bosnia in the early 1990s and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have had a demonstrably negative effect on the radicalisation of European Muslims. Although various jihadist and Islamist groups are seeking to do so, it is arguably quite difficult to frame the current behaviour of the West as inherently inimical towards Muslims and, therefore, to see it as directly triggering radicalisation among European Muslims.

Assessing Reactions

Assessing the attitudes of European Muslims or even of just those of specific diaspora communities towards the Arab Awakening and, consequently, the implications for radicalisation is impossible. No community is monolithic and thinking that each has one view is an oversimplification that ignores the infinite fragmentations that characterise them. Perhaps one slightly more systematic approach would be to divide members of each North African diaspora community along political lines and, more specifically given the topic considered, distinguishing between Islamists and non-Islamists. Among the

³ EUROPOL TE-SAT 2011, p. 6,
http://www.europol.europa.eu/publications/EU_Terrorism_Situation_and_Trend_Report_TE-SAT/TE-SAT2011.pdf.

⁴ <http://forums.islamicawakening.com/f18/are-the-protests-in-syria-doing-anything-46762/>.

former group, which is obviously significantly smaller than the latter, we can also identify different strands, such as violent rejectionists (individuals and networks that, often linked to or inspired by al-Qaeda, reject participation in the democratic system and use violence to advance their goals), non-violent rejectionists (groups, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, that openly reject the legitimacy of any system of government not based on Islamic law, but do not, at least publicly and openly, advocate the use of violence to further their goals), and participationists (individuals and groups that adhere to that strand of Islamism that advocates interaction with society at large, both at the micro-level through grassroots activism, and at the macro-level through participation in public life and the democratic process).

So, creating a somewhat complex matrix, one could proceed by identifying, for example, what Tunisian violent rejectionists, non-violent rejectionists, participationists and non-Islamists are saying. The same model could then be applied to any diaspora group. But for every sub-group of every nationality one will find a variety of opinions and, as the only common denominator, a sense of bewilderment to the fast pace of the Arab Awakening.

It might be interesting to start our analysis with violent rejectionists from the Libyan scene. The Libyan diaspora community in Europe is very small, but Libyan jihadists have a long-established presence on the Continent. Many of them have travelled back to Libya to fight over the last few months and the fact that they are fighting with NATO backing represents an unforeseen and interesting development. The former leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, a long-time al-Qaeda affiliate, Noman Benotman has raised a valid point about this development.⁵ Benotman recounts how the militants with which he fought alongside against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s had reacted to the decisions of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to ally themselves with the US against Saddam Hussein in the summer of 1990. 'According to their particular understanding of Islam, anyone who allies with non-Muslims, the *kuffar*, to fight against Muslims was an apostate. This intellectual framework', adds Benotman 'provided the justification for many of al-Qaeda's subsequent actions'.⁶

Benotman tells that now all LIFG leaders are very appreciative of NATO's support and those LIFG members who have died while fighting the Qaddafi regime over the last few weeks are unanimously considered martyrs, not apostates who fought alongside infidels. 'It's changed the way we look at the West', tellingly said Abdel Hakim al-Hisadi, a LIFG member and former trainer in al-Qaeda's Khost camp, 'they saved our people and we have to say thanks'.⁷ Benotman also reports that the LIFG leadership is unable to explain this contradictory analysis. 'The reason for this confusion is that the issues at stake go to the very heart of jihadi ideology', concludes Benotman. 'If a jihadist accepts that it is permissible in Islam for Muslims to support the NATO intervention in Libya and to fight against Qaddafi with NATO assistance, then they are essentially accepting that the rigid ideology of jihadism is imperfect and perhaps even wrong'.⁸

How deep this internal re-examination of jihadist ideology will go is hard to say. It could be argued that it is limited to the LIFG (or even that the LIFG is just opportunistic but willing

⁵ Personal conversation with Benotman (Lucca, May 2011).

⁶ Noman Benotman (2011), 'NATO in Libya is a Challenge to Bin Laden's Ideology', *Foreign Policy*, 18/V/2011,

http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/05/18/nato_in_libya_is_a_challenge_to_bin_ladens_ideology.

⁷ "A Golden Opportunity?" *The Economist*, 31/III/2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/18486089>.

⁸ Noman Benotman (2011), *op. cit.*

to fully antagonise the West once Qaddafi is defeated). Some argue that Libyan jihadists have always been split between ‘nationalist’ (the core of the LIFG) and ‘internationalist’ (like Abu Yahya al Libi), and that the latter, along with most non-Libyan jihadists, will not be affected by these developments. Yet it is arguably another setback for al-Qaeda’s ideology with possible implications for radicalization in Europe.

While LIFG has a relatively small presence in Europe, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb does possess an extensive and long-established network in several European countries. The group has attempted to co-opt the revolution in Tunisia and the protests in Algeria but its overtures seem to have had virtually no impact.⁹ Where AQIM’s efforts seem to have been more successful is in exploiting the unrest in Tunisia and Libya for operational purposes, reportedly expanding its reach to two countries where it previously had only a limited presence (in Tunisia recruiting and plotting attacks and in Libya allegedly obtaining weapons). And AQIM’s public statements vowing to fight NATO in Libya – a position in clear contraposition to LIFG’s– is troubling for Europe.¹⁰

These developments are obviously disquieting from a European perspective and so is the possibility that AQIM operatives could enter Europe with the flow of illegal immigrants that are seeking to reach the Continent from North Africa at a much higher rate since the beginning of the Arab Awakening. There are also some indications that AQIM might be developing plans to act upon its fiery anti-French and anti-Spanish rhetoric. Reports indicate that, upon his arrest, Abu Anas al Shanqiti, AQIM’s Mauritanian religious leader, has told Algerian interrogators that he had plans to send several cells to infiltrate France and other European countries. And indeed one of al Shanqiti’s associates was later reportedly arrested by Algerian authorities while boarding a ship headed to Europe.¹¹

There is no question that AQIM represents a threat to some European countries and, from a strictly operational point of view, it can be argued that the group has somewhat benefited from the Arab Awakening (access to new areas of operation, less control from the authorities, potential of sending militants to Europe masquerading as refugees). But there are no indications of any increase in the group’s popularity and recruiting capabilities among European Muslims. In reality, while AQIM does indeed have networks in Europe, most prospective North African jihadists paradoxically do not go to the Maghreb when seeking training or fighting experience but, rather, travel to Pakistan or, to a lesser degree, Yemen and Somalia. That is unquestionably due in part to the logistical difficulties of linking up with AQIM in its impervious desert hideouts. But it also confirms the point made at the beginning of this paper that most European-born jihadists are ‘global’ in their attitude and have little attachment to their ancestral home. The average Parisian or Milanese prospective jihadist of North African origin wants to join the jihad wherever it is possible, and if connecting with al-Qaeda-affiliated networks in Waziristan is easier than in the Maghreb, that is not an issue. In the words of the Moroccan national Yassin Chouka, one of the German-based militants who recently joined the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in Waziristan: ‘We wanted to go to one of the countries in which the jihad... is led. Whether the trip was to Somalia, Palestine, Chechnya or Indonesia played no role for us. The main thing was that we went there’.¹² Somewhat

⁹ *Al Shuruk*, 10/II/2011.

¹⁰ ‘Abu Obeida El Annabi: “We Will Fight NATO in Libya”’, *Ennahar Online*, 9/VII/2011, <http://www.ennaharonline.com/en/news/7017.html>.

¹¹ *Al Khabar*, 6/II/2011.

¹² Bill Roggio (2011), ‘German Terrorists Pass Through Yemen, Meet Awlaki, Before Joining IMU in Pakistan’, *Long War Journal*, 15/II/2011, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/02/german_terrorists_pa.php.

counterintuitively, AQIM has only limited appeal among European Muslims beyond its long-established networks.

As the jihadist movement tries to remain ideologically relevant by framing current events in its terms, so are non-violent rejectionists. Branches of Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) throughout Europe have made public displays of support for the protest movement, boldly stating that the protestors seek what HT has long advocated.¹³ It should be no surprise that this message has found only limited support and that, in some cases, HT members were forced out of demonstrations taking place in front of embassies of North African countries in various European capitals by other protesters. Like many jihadists, HT questions the ulterior motives of Western intervention in Libya, calling it 'colonial' and linking it to oil rather than humanitarian reasons.¹⁴ It is not unlikely that small numbers of European Muslims accept this narrative and that, if hypothetically Western interventions should increase or protract much longer, more could buy into it. Yet it seems fair to say that, at least for the time being, few European Muslims are likely to subscribe to this narrative.

With violent and non-violent rejectionists struggling to stay ideologically relevant, it can be argued that participationists are the potential winners among Islamists (that applies to North Africa and, as a potential consequence, to Europe as well). Muslim Brotherhood networks throughout Europe are galvanised by the Arab Awakening. If some of their historical leaders, like Kamal Helbway and Rachid Ghannouchi, have triumphantly returned to their home countries after decades in exile, other Brotherhood activists are seeking to translate this enthusiasm into gains also in Europe. Ideally, they see the potential rise of the Brotherhood in North Africa as attracting more European Muslims to the Brotherhood's ideology. While the phenomenon, which at this point is nothing more than a pure hypothesis, has no direct implications on violent radicalisation, it is nevertheless noteworthy.

The potential rise of participationist Islamism in North Africa might trigger another phenomenon. The evidence is, at this point, nothing more than anecdotal, but the European-based leadership of 'old' violent rejectionist groups from various North African countries is apparently reconsidering its stance and thinking that participation is the best strategy. While this development has long been taking place very publicly for some Egyptian groups (Gamaa Islamiya and, to a lesser degree, EIJ), long-time European-based leaders of Tunisian and Algerian (FIS/GIA) jihadist groups have expressed similar views in less open ways. The process started years ago but the events of the Arab Awakening have sped it up. Despite more than legitimate concerns about how genuine their embrace of democracy is and some of their positions, the development can be seen positively.

Conclusion: Having concluded a summary overview of the impact of the Arab Awakening on European Islamists, it remains to be seen what the implications are for the much larger constituency of non-Islamists –that is, the vast majority of Muslims living in Europe–. Here the analytical challenge becomes overwhelming and anything beyond anecdotes, gut feeling and educated guesses is premature. There is no question that the events of the Arab Awakening have generated enormous attention and emotions and the general

¹³ <http://www.hizb.org.uk/real-change/london-demonstration-supports-middle-east-uprisings>.

¹⁴ <http://www.hizb.org.uk/islamic-culture/western-governments-foreign-policy> and <http://www.hizb.org.uk/current-affairs/an-open-letter-to-the-british-political-establishment-opposing-colonial-intervention-in-libya>.

feeling is one of excitement and hope.¹⁵ There are of course sceptics and those who see the revolutions and Western intervention in Libya as part of a plot to dominate the region (an opinion voiced by some Arab nationalists). But, for the most part, the events are seen positively and the role of the West not in negative terms.

There are two final considerations to be made, exploring potentially negative future scenarios. One has to do with the potential reverberations in Europe of sectarian strife in Egypt. If the sparks between Muslims and Copts seen over the last few weeks deteriorate into a pattern of aggression, there are legitimate concerns that similar dynamics would ensue, obviously on a much smaller scale, in Europe. There are relatively large Egyptian Coptic communities in various European countries and in Italy, for example, there have been tensions between them and sections of the large Egyptian Muslim community in the wake of the latest attacks on churches in Egypt.

Finally, arguably the most immediate security challenge triggered by the Arab Awakening is the influx of large numbers of migrants, their increase determined by the upheaval in the region but also by the lack of controls from local regimes. Aside from the most obvious security implications of this phenomenon, it can be argued that the influx of migrants can give rise to the expression of racist and xenophobic sentiments among segments of the population and some parties in various European countries. While identifying these sentiments as the cause for the violent radicalisation of some European Muslims is simplistic, they do arguably play a role in the process. It is just an arguably unrepresentative anecdote, but worshippers at a French mosque recently told the author that the pride they felt in seeing French flags waved in Benghazi ('when was the last time a Western flag was waved and not immediately burned in a Muslim country?' sarcastically but poignantly said one of the worshippers) was cooled by the image of the French *gendarmarie* stopping trains at the Italian border looking for Tunisian immigrants.¹⁶

These two latest considerations further highlight the potentially unlimited and therefore currently unpredictable possible implications of the Arab Awakening on radicalisation in Europe. Assessing the impact of such an unforeseen, lightning-paced, and complex phenomenon that, moreover, is taking different trajectories in different countries is unquestionably a daunting task. But it is also a crucially important one, given its potential implications on European and global security.

Lorenzo Vidino

Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Security Studies, ETH Zürich

¹⁵ The emotional impact of the Arab Awakening on some European Muslims, particularly first generation immigrants from North Africa, cannot be overstated. Aside from the many positive implications, one episode stands out for its dramatic tones which, nevertheless, show the deep influence of the events in North Africa on European Muslims. In February, the 27-year-old Moroccan illegal street vendor Nouredine Adnane set himself on fire in Palermo, Italy, to protest the seizure of his wares by the local authorities. The act is obviously inspired by that of Mohammed Bouazizi, the Tunisian street vendor whose gesture unexpectedly triggered the Jasmine revolution.

¹⁶ Personal interviews in a mosque in Côte d'Azur, May 2011.