

Is the War on Terror Over?

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MARK JUERGENSMEYER, MAR 7 2012

Bin Laden is dead. The Arab Spring has spawned new waves of popular unrest in the Middle East and beyond. Is the War on Terror finally over?

For the past thirty years, the jihadi movement has crested on a wave of popular unrest and been propelled by the moral legitimacy given by their violent interpretation of the Muslim notion of ethical struggle. Though jihadi activists such as those associated with Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network have been regarded from outside the region simply as immoral terrorists, much of their popularity within the Islamic world has been their moral appeal.

These activists thought only bloodshed would create political change, and only the jihadi ideology of cosmic warfare—based on Muslim history and Qur'anic verses—provided the moral legitimacy for the struggle. Ideologists such as Abd al-Salam Farad and Ayman al-Zawahiri have written as if violent struggle—including ruthless attacks of terrorism on civilian populations—was the only form of struggle that was advocated by Islam.

These assumptions have been proven wrong. The dramatic popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, Iran, and elsewhere in the Islamic world have demonstrated that protests that have been nonviolent in their inception (and have become violent only in response to bloody attempts to repress them) have been far more common, occasionally more effective, and supported with a more widespread moral and spiritual consensus.

What brought down the autocratic regimes in Egypt and Tunisia, as it turned out, was about as far from jihad as one could imagine. It was a series of massive nonviolent movements of largely middle class and relatively young professionals who organized their protests through Facebook, Twitter, and other forms of electronic social networking.

There was also a religious element to the protests. The peak moments came after Friday prayers, when sympathetic mullahs would urge the faithful into joining the protest as a religious duty. But theirs was not the divisive, hateful voice of jihadi rhetoric. In a remarkable moment when the Muslim protestors were trying to conduct their prayers in the Square and Mubarak's thugs tried to attack them as they prayed, a cordon of Egyptian Coptic Christians who had joined the protests circled around their Muslim compatriots, shielding them. Later a phalanx of Muslim protestors protected their Christian comrades as they worshipped in the public square, an urban intersection that was for that time transformed into a massive interfaith sanctuary.

The religiosity of Tahrir Square is far from the religion of radical jihad. Rather than separating Muslim from non-Muslim, and Sunni from Shi'a, the symbols that were raised on impromptu placards in Tahrir Square were emblems of interfaith cooperation; they showed the cross of Coptic Christians together with the crescent of Egypt's Muslims in a united religious front against autocracy.

Imagine what Osama bin Laden must have made of all of this as news trickled into the fortress-like mansion in Abbottabad where he lived for the several years before his death at the hands of an elite cadre of US Navy Seals. Imagine even more the puzzled chagrin of someone like bin Laden's primary lieutenant, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the Egyptian medical doctor who joined the most extreme Islamist jihadi movement years ago, convinced that only violent guerilla warfare would topple someone like Mubarak.

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Though a few of the hardened activists associated with al Qaeda will linger on, the fate of the global jihadi ideology—or rather the world view of cosmic war that the jihadi rhetoric promoted—has been profoundly challenged. As Tahrir Square showed, God does not always have to fight, at least not in the terrorist ways that the jihadi warriors imagined. In a couple of weeks of protests, the peaceful resisters demonstrated the moral and strategic legitimacy of nonviolent struggle. And they succeeded, where years of jihadi bloodshed had not produced a single political change.

Yet the story is not over. Failures of mass resistance may lead to a terrorist backlash once again. Not all protests will end like Tunisia and Egypt. Others will be ruthlessly crushed, as was the Green Revolution in Iran in 2009. The protests in Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria face an uncertain end. Failure of nonviolent revolution has, in the past, been the occasion for renewed acts of violence.

So the jihadi warriors may again have their day. For the moment, however, bin Laden is dead, and Tahrir Square has challenged both the strategic value and the moral legitimacy of the jihadi stance. The legion of young Muslim activists around the world have received a new standard for challenging the old order, and a new form of protest, one that discredits terrorism as the easy and ineffective path and chooses the tough and profitable road of democratic reform.

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