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Al Qaeda's Odd Silence on Egypt

by *Bruce Riedel*

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Ayman al Zawahiri, the voice of the terror cell, has not spoken out since the unrest in Cairo began. Bruce Riedel on why democracy's gain is bin Laden's worst nightmare.

There is a famous Arab saying that the dog barks but the caravan moves on. In Egypt, the caravan of change has moved fast this winter, but one of the dogs most expected to bark has been silent so far. Al Qaeda's number two, Ayman Zawahiri, who has spent his life fighting Hosni Mubarak and calling for a revolution in his homeland, has yet to comment in public on the momentous events in his native land. His silence is probably temporary. But it shows al Qaeda's top leadership is under significant pressure in Pakistan today from the American counter-terrorism offensive ordered by President Obama two years ago.

Zawahiri began his career as a terrorist as a junior player in the plot that assassinated Mubarak's predecessor Anwar Sadat in October 1981. He was imprisoned and tortured for his role and became the spokesman in jail for the assassins. Released after several years he went into exile and created Egyptian Islamic Jihad, which waged a blood-soaked campaign of terror across the globe against Mubarak's regime. His terrorists targeted Egyptian embassies in Pakistan and elsewhere, murdered tourists in Luxor, and tried to kill senior regime officials at home and abroad. Chased out of the Sudan, Zawahiri joined with Osama bin Laden in 1998 in Afghanistan in declaring war on America and its allies in the Islamic world.

For over a decade, Zawahiri has been the voice of al Qaeda. He has issued dozens of audio and video messages proclaiming the coming victory of the global jihad and justifying its use of terror. He was the most frequent spokesman for al Qaeda until last year. Then in 2010 he issued only four messages, two less than a minute long each. Now more than two weeks after the Egyptian revolution began, he has yet to be heard from. Al Qaeda's franchise in North Africa, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, has commented on the Jasmine revolution in Tunisia and bin Laden has threatened France since the unrest began. But neither bin Laden nor Zawahiri has said anything yet about the biggest change in the Islamic world in years which is taking place in Egypt.

We can only speculate that the drones have made it more and more difficult to get propaganda messages safely out of Pakistan. Zawahiri is certainly eager to talk but his operational tempo as a propaganda star has deteriorated in the last year. As long as the pressure continues, al Qaeda's ability to speak to the world is constrained.

Zawahiri probably also has very mixed feelings about what is going on in his homeland. No doubt he welcomes Mubarak's demise. He has called for the Egyptian leader's overthrow for three decades. But al Qaeda and Zawahiri know they have been bypassed in the streets of Cairo, Suez and Alexandria. This is not their revolution and they are not its inspiration. They may try to jump on the bandwagon but this is not their caravan.

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Worse, their hated enemy, Egypt's oldest Islamic party, the Muslim Brotherhood or Ikhwan, stands to benefit from the opening of Egyptian politics that seems to be coming next. Already the Brotherhood is negotiating along with other opposition groups with Mubarak's new vice president, Omar Suleiman, about the next steps in the revolution. If there are free and relatively fair elections, the Brotherhood will probably do well. It could be a part of some coalition government in the future.

For al Qaeda that would be a disaster. They have denounced the Brotherhood for years for participating in Mubarak's rigged elections and for advocating change through non-violence. Both Zawahiri and bin Laden were once members of the Ikhwan but long ago they left it because it would not support their use of terror. To see the Brotherhood now playing a significant role in changing Egypt is a major setback for al Qaeda. If the Brotherhood demonstrates that an Islamist party can help bring regime change and reform in the largest Arab country without jihadi terror, al Qaeda will be isolated. Undoubtedly Zawahiri still hopes al Qaeda can benefit from the changes in Cairo. Al Qaeda certainly will use the chaos in Egypt to infiltrate operatives into the country and to set up underground cells; it may have had a hand in the bombing of a Coptic Christian church in Alexandria at the end of last year. If Mubarak or his cronies somehow hang on to power and suppress the opposition, then the Egyptian street will be radicalized and might turn to more violent methods of regime change. When we do hear from Zawahiri, he will urge the revolution to move to the extremes and denounce moderation. But every day that passes without his diatribe appearing shows he has lost out in the struggle for his homelands future.

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