CAN WE STOP VIOLENT EXTREMISM FROM GOING MAINSTREAM IN NORTH AFRICA?

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For most of the last decade, the fight against violent extremism in North Africa pitted the United States and its allies against bands of fighters holed up in the wilderness. While many Islamist groups shared the extremists' goal of creating an Islamic state, most focused on social and political action to pursue their goals. Al Qaeda's affiliates in North Africa took a different approach. They used violence to polarize societies and deepen the split between local populations on the one hand and the United States and allied governments on the other. Al Qaeda's strategy produced spectacles of violence, yet it remains a fringe phenomenon that fails to inspire a critical mass.

Revolutionary change sparked by the Arab uprisings in 2011 created unprecedented space for new kinds of activism. It also unleashed a wave of extremism that is increasingly mainstream. Adherents to this view combine al Qaeda's violent outlook and goal of establishing an Islamic empire with grassroots social and political activism. This combination resonates powerfully with many young people, especially those who are eager to influence their societies after decades of marginalization. By focusing on social and political activism rather than solely on terrorism and violence to achieve their aims, these new groups appeal to a much broader cross-section of society than al Qaeda's narrow focus ever could.

As this new extremism evolves, it threatens to undermine fragile governments and radicalize publics in societies already polarized by deep cultural, socioeconomic, and political cleavages. New groups such as Ansar al Sharia in Tunisia and Libya are not replacing al Qaeda affiliates, but they are evolving alongside them. Their followers have mobilized and used violence to enforce their puritanical social norms, destroy popular shrines they deem un-Islamic, and attack diplomatic facilities. A large mass of adherents that occasionally uses violence could ultimately be more destabilizing to states than a hardened group of fighters on society's margins. While the U.S. and regional governmental response to al Qaeda's narrow strategy focuses on counterterrorism, the antidote to this popular extremism will require navigating a complex mix of local socioeconomic, religious, and political dynamics that are largely beyond the control of the United States.

The new generation of extremists has learned from al Qaeda's failures. They are also coming of age during a period of upheaval and political uncertainty. People are frustrated with the slow pace of change and the unmet expectations of new governments. In Tunisia and Libya in particular, extremists benefit from weak governments as they can organize and propagate their message with fewer constraints. Rather than existing on the margins of society and trying to lure away young men, the new extremists are a dynamic part of society with broader appeal. Activists are students, teachers, and shop keepers who believe in reshaping their society rather than destroying it.

To be sure, al Qaeda's old model still exists. The attack on a gas facility in Algeria in January 2013 and the takeover of Northern Mali in 2012 illustrates that al Qaeda's approach has also benefitted from the upheaval of the post-Arab uprising environment. Governments in Libya and Tunisia are weak; thousands of militants imprisoned by former regimes were released; and weapons from Qaddafi's arsenal are readily available across the region. Hundreds, if not thousands, of young men from North Africa are now fighting in Syria. The survivors will return home with combat skills, new networks, and a sense of empowerment. Policymakers need to formulate strategies for both the old and new extremists that take into account their differences, similarities, and how they overlap.

The answer to al Qaeda's strategy is relatively straightforward: locate and kill militant leaders and fighters to disrupt future attacks while addressing the underlying causes of extremism through economic and political development. Countering the new generation of extremism, however, is more complex, because the combination of grassroots activism and extremist ideology creates new ambiguities about the use of violence, making a counterterrorism-focused approach less effective and more likely to strengthen the appeal of extremism rather than diminish it.

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The broader challenge will be delegitimizing the use of violence as a political tool and preventing mainstream extremists from crossing the line to embrace al Qaeda's wanton violence. Opening political space for Islamists has been one strategy, but it also risks legitimizing extremist voices. Professionalizing security forces and the justice sector in ways that minimize abuse against populations is crucial. De-radicalization programs which provide alternative religious interpretations and practices are also an important component of any strategy, though their short-term impact is likely to be limited.

While the United States can play a role in addressing this evolving challenge, ultimately governments in North Africa will need to take the lead. The United States can provide partner governments with additional support and training, but those efforts should be designed to ensure that they target extremist threats, not to suppress legitimate forms of political opposition. Strengthening multilateral cooperation in the region, especially among quarrelsome neighbors, is also important, because extremism threatens every country in the region.

Extremists have not captured the Arab uprisings, but they are exploiting the new-found freedoms won through popularly-driven political change, and they are capitalizing on widespread frustration. Growing numbers of young people across the region see violence as a legitimate political tool. Ultimately this mainstream extremism is less dramatic than al Qaeda's version, but over the next generation it will have a far greater impact in shaping the region. ►