7. CONCLUSION

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While many observers of the Arab world had believed for years that change was inevitable, the Arab uprisings themselves came as a complete surprise. The idea that a self-immolating fruit seller in Tunisia could shake the political foundations of the Arab world to their core would have been thought ludicrous just the week before events unfolded. By March 2011, as uprisings churned in Libya, Syria, Morocco, Bahrain, and beyond, it seemed clear that these changes would prove transformational. The question was not whether change would come, but how complete it would be. After decades in which authoritarian governments secured themselves by protecting secular liberals and religious conservatives from each other, secular and religious groups were uniting with one another and with an unprecedentedly entrepreneurial generation of young people to rise up against authoritarianism.

And yet, as the months passed, the old authoritarian systems proved surprisingly durable. Some sitting governments were able to co-opt their populations through material reward or the promise of political reform; others were able to rally their populations against the prospect of insurgency. Still others revived repression. Most importantly, governments were able to learn from each other's mistakes. After an initial flurry of change, the process slowed. In some places, such as Bahrain, it seemed to be arrested. In Egypt, the process actually reversed.

While it was surprising to most observers that that Arab uprisings did not result in more-liberal political systems, what was more surprising was the way in which it revived radical movements. Indeed, almost four years after the fact, radical movements in the Arab world seem to have been even more invigorated by the Arab uprisings than liberal ones. This is in part because many of the radical movements embraced the idea of fighting, and the breakdown in order allowed more fighting to occur across the region. Ungoverned space in the Sahara and the Levant has created opportunities for radical groups to train and equip, and contested space has given them a forum for battle.

But there was a more worrying aspect to the resurgence of radical movements. Many of the radical groups learned potent lessons from the revolutionary political movements of the Arab uprisings. Experiments with social media that began in the laboratory of revolutionary Egypt and Syria found their way into extremists' tool kits. In the 2000s, websites and chat rooms were the somewhat static, one-to-many platforms for recruitment and communication. In the 2010s, private messages, Tweets, and videos dubbed into dozens of languages made jihad not only truly global but also infinitely customizable. Recruiters did not need to wonder how their messages were being received, because they were in constant and intimate contact with the recipients.

In a way, the religious radicals always had an advantage over the political revolutionaries. The latter sought mass support, hoping to rally majorities to their cause. They needed millions in the streets, and they needed diverse audiences to join in common cause. The rainbow that poured into Egypt's public squares in 2011—young and old, rich and poor, religious and secular—represented their dream. It soon proved difficult to sustain.

The religious radicals have always had a different model, one that is content to assemble a violent vanguard from disaffected communities around the world. They need not fill any squares, and they need not draw a diverse set of adherents. Judged as a mass movement, the radicals have failed; they have attracted

only a tiny percentage of their audience. But becoming a mass movement was never central to their ambition. As a vanguard and fighting force they have found at least limited success, winning battles and rallying tens of thousands to their cause.

What all of this means for the Middle East is a continuation of conflicts that many thought were coming to an end. The raging wars in Libya, Syria, and Iraq—all of which owe at least part of their origin to the Arab uprisings—have gathered existing religious, ethnic, and sectarian tensions into large and messy existential struggles. These conflicts not only radicalize young men in the affected countries, but they attract foreign fighters in search of a cause, or adventure, or spiritual reward. None of these conflicts appears close to ending.

Beyond the Middle East, the consequences are less clear. A few foreign fighters have emerged from war zones to commit hate crimes, such as the former Islamic State of Iraq and Syria fighter who opened fire in a Jewish museum in Brussels, Belgium, killing four.[1] Syria has already attracted more than twice as many foreign fighters as the decade-long anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan, and it seems possible that the raging conflicts in the Sahel and the Levant will spread new extremist techniques, reach new adherents, and connect new networks.

Yet many close observers of terrorism doubt that the West will be much affected by these foreign fighters. Some argue that the number of returnees is likely to be small, although they warn that those returnees will be more lethal after their foreign experience.[2] Others suggest most foreign fighters will die on the battlefield, and those who survive can be managed through robust intelligence activities.[3]

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1. Anne Penketh, "Brussels Jewish Museum Shooting: Suspect with Islamist Links Arrested," *Guardian*, June 1, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/01/suspect-arrest-brussels-jewish-museum-shooting.
2. Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," *American Political Science Review,* 107, no. 1 (February 2013): 1–15, doi:10.1017/S0003055412000615.
3. Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, "Homeward Bound?" *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 6 (November/December 2014): 37-46.

Whatever the numbers of jihadists, the Arab uprisings seem to have increased the innovation and entrepreneurship of radical groups in the Middle East, at the same time that they increased the opportunities for radicals to gain battlefield experience. For those seeking to combat radicalism, the challenges will only grow more complex.

Most troubling for policymakers is the uncertainty about when the pitched battle against extremism will end. For the political revolutionaries of the Arab uprisings, it was relatively clear what "victory" would look like: the demise of the old order and a more pluralistic future for their countries. They sought to energize the streets. There would be little mystery about the outcomes. The battles would have to be fought, and victory would need to be found, in the relatively clear light of politics.

For radicals, victory is much more obscure. Some proclaim victory in their martyrdom-seeking operations, embracing their own deaths as an ennobling triumph. Some seek reward in a constant battle against mortal enemies. More recently, some have claimed victory in the establishment of their caliphate, a collection of impoverished, dusty cities ruled under the stern glare of religious police. What unifies their vision is an acceptance of the idea of deadly conflict stretching far into the future, fought by irregular forces arrayed against better-armed foes. It is a logic that rewards asymmetrical warfare and accepts heavy casualties. For the rest of the world, it is a daunting prospect.