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2011

Mohamed Redzuan Salleh., & Muhammad Haniff Hassan. (2011). The Egyptian uprising :
waning threat of the jihadists. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 016). RSIS Commentaries.
Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/79743>



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No. 16/2011 dated 11 February 2011

The Egyptian Uprising: Waning Threat of the Jihadists

By Mohamed Redzuan Salleh and Muhammad Haniff Hassan

Synopsis

The Egyptian uprising is showing no sign of abating. Amidst the Western paranoia that Islamists will rise to power, is the prospect of this uprising turning into a jihadist threat real or imagined?

Commentary

THAT EGYPT is traditionally a base for jihadists needs no reiteration. Jihadists advocate that the “Islamic solution” can only be realised via armed jihad, not democratic participation. Terrorism analysts are now asking themselves the following questions: Will the current instability in Egypt increase the threat of jihadist terrorism? How much influence do the jihadists have in determining the outcome of the uprising? How true is the skeptics’ claim that the deradicalisation of Gama’a Islamiyya, once a major jihadist outfit, was just a tactical deception -- a mere postponement of their violent agenda until an opportunity arises? How valid is the fear that jihadists would capitalise on the peaceful revolt to advance their goal?

Thus far, the current uprising of the Egyptian people, numbering by the millions and not showing any signs of waning, seems to have remarkably overshadowed the global fear of the jihadist terror threat. Various indicators serve to support this point. Firstly, the popular uprising has stayed away from the tendency for violence right from the outset, although a number of them have been killed mindlessly as evident from videos now circulating online. Secondly, there is no sign of jihadist influence in motivating or sustaining this people’s revolution. Thirdly, even the claim that the Gama’a ceasefire in 1997 was a tactical manoeuvre, and that they will again resort to violence when the opportunity arises, now seems baseless.

Motivation of the Uprising

Most importantly, the revolt is neither about Islam nor jihad; rather, it is more about freedom and bread and butter. This people’s revolution which started on January 25 triggered by the uprising in Tunisia seems to have caught everyone off guard. Their one clear demand is the most repeated word in Egypt right now: “Irhal, ya Mubarak!” (Get out, Mubarak!). Whatever the main motivation was, the protest was certainly far from any jihadist (or Islamist) motivation. Even the non-violent Muslim Brotherhood, dubbed as the most influential mobilising power in Egypt and the largest Islamist movement, initially took an unusual back seat in this regard. Unlike the jihadists, Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood believe the “Islamic solution” can happen via democratic process. Also, none of the other opposition political parties seem to even want to take credit for having initiated or even sustaining the revolution, although not for long. The Muslim Brotherhood and other opposition parties are now making themselves heard in support of the “people power” uprising.

The faceless organisers of this youth-backed protest seemed adamant to let the political parties out of this and portray this as solely a non-violent people's revolution. There were only, at least, two instances of violent reaction from the protesters, and they were in retaliation to instigation and violence from pro-Mubarak actors. The first was when they were instigated by the police on the first few days of the uprising. The second when they were instigated by pro-Mubarak "supporters" who stormed into the square on horses and camels.

Jihadist Influence

In this protest, the non-Islamists seem to be more influential. The Islamists, furthermore, do not seem to have a supporting majority. If Islamists who are much closer to the masses than the jihadists are finding it difficult to pursue their Islamist agenda, the jihadists will no doubt face even greater challenge, if not resistance. Should the jihadists have a major influence on the uprising, one would surely expect their violent tactics such as bombings to be employed, or at least instigated. Thus far, little has come out from the jihadist forums; and none of the jihadist leaders are known to have capitalised on this situation. This is quite unusual given that Osama Bin Laden himself at one time had even jumped on the issue of global warming.

Nevertheless, one significant issue was recently raised in the forum of Minbar al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad, the largest jihadist website. A question was asked regarding the permissibility of involvement in the protests; the response was that Muslims should participate and that suicide bombings are encouraged. This instigation, however, did not find any resonance among the millions protesting throughout Egypt after three weeks of mass protest. There is some chatter in the jihadist forums, but there currently seems to be no significant role played by the jihadists.

Gama'a Islamiyya Issue

A significant point to raise here is the stand of the Gama'a Islamiyya, the most influential ex-jihadist organisation -- now a social organisation -- in Egypt. This group has announced its ceasefire initiative in July 1997. Then seen by some to be a tactical manoeuvre to postpone their violent agenda, there has been no indication whatsoever that this group is capitalising on the Egyptian uprising to resume its pre-ceasefire stance. If there is a best time to exploit the situation in Egypt, this certainly may well be the only opportunity the group has in its lifetime.

In contrast, by maintaining a neutral stand, the Gama'a has lent more credence to the ideological revisions it has published. For now, this does not provide support to the skeptics' claim -- that the Gama'a was just making a tactical change in its posture. On the other hand, the group is surprised -- as stated in its official website - that it was not invited to the recent talks initiated by the Vice President Omar Suleiman with representatives of the opposition which included the Muslim Brotherhood.

On the Fringe

Even if jihadists want in, it is unlikely that the protesters would want to allow jihadists to hijack their cause; this would potentially deal a fatal blow to the uprising. That the protesters held Tahrir Square firmly within their grip amidst fierce instigation bears testimony to this. The uprising, for now, instead indicates that the jihadists are truly on the fringe.

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