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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **The Arab People's Uprising: The Jihadist Perspective**

By Zulkifli Mohamed Sultan and Muhammad Haniff Hassan

### **Synopsis**

*The Arab uprisings, particularly in Egypt, have divided online jihadists. While a majority support the demonstrations, the minority of jihadists say the revolts are not jihad.*

### **Commentary**

SINCE THE beginning of the popular uprisings in Egypt and other Arab states, jihadists have been divided in their reactions to the "unarmed people's revolution". They have expressed conflicting opinions on whether protests and demonstrations are defensible in Islam. Nevertheless they have issued statements and commentaries giving their views and analyses for the guidance of their followers. Their objective was to show their concern for the state of Muslims and influence the events by impressing their audiences that they had a hand in them.

The most significant of these was a seven-part commentary by Ayman Al-Zawahiri, leader of Al-Qaeda, entitled Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt.

### **Pro-Uprising**

Jihadists who support the uprising in Egypt and endorse unarmed protests and demonstrations represent the majority strand. In his Message of Hope, Ayman Al Zawahiri, Al-Qaeda's successor to Osama bin Laden, praised the people of Egypt and urged his audience to join the protesters. He even claimed that Al-Qaeda's attacks on the United States were a key factor in the agitations that culminated in the eruption of the Arab uprisings. Although he did not issue a clear fatwa on the permissibility of protests and demonstrations in Islam, his statements suggest a positive endorsement of them. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) also expressed similar support in an audio statement by Ibrahim bin Sulayman Al-Rubaysh entitled Hisad Al-Thawrat (Harvest of Revolutions),

Abu Al-Mundhir Al-Shinqiti, an important jihadist thinker and prolific writer, issued his personal fatwa that participation in the demonstrations in Egypt is permissible in Islam and does not contradict the jihadist stand that armed jihad is the key for their mission. In addition, he wrote a lengthy treatise entitled Al-Taqrirat Fi Mashru'iyat Al-Muzaharat (Standpoints on the Permissibility of Demonstration) to refute Muslims (jihadist and non-jihadist) who maintain that demonstrations are unlawful in Islam.

Another jihadist thinker, Abu Basir Al-Turtusi, agreed with Al-Shinqity. He compiled his facebook posts in a 300-

page document entitled *Daftar Al-Thawrah Wa Al-Thuwwar* (Book of Revolution and Revolutionaries) where he argued the permissibility of demonstrations and states: "Demonstration and civil disobedience is a form collective protest against evil that is manifested in the form of a tyrant, government and ruling party."

In *Inspire* (no. 5), the AQAP online magazine, its editor Yahya Ibrahim writes: "Al- Qaeda is not against regime changes through protests but it is against the idea that the change should be only through peaceful means to the exclusion of the use of force." Ibrahim then asserted that the accuracy of this view is proven by the turn of events in Libya: "If the protesters in Libya did not have the flexibility to use force when needed, the uprising would have been crushed."

### **Armed jihad only**

Ahmad Bawadi, a Jordanian jihadist ideologue and regular contributor of jihadist online forums, wrote an article entitled *Revolutions Are No Substitute for Jihad*, which was published by the Taliban English website. Commenting on the Arab Spring, Bawadi argued that "a revolution for a loaf of bread is not a jihad" and revolutions carried out in the name of economic or political reforms are insufficient to promote the communal and moral makeover required by the true jihad.

He further said: "No one should think that a revolution over unemployment will close the wine shops and nightclubs. They will not prevent women from going outside wearing make-up and unveiled and will not prevent them from showing their nakedness at pools and on the beaches. The networks of singing, dancing, prostitution and shamelessness will not be shut down by these revolutions" as long as democracy becomes the religion of the people and an alternative to jihad.

Umar Mahdi Zaydan, a prominent sheikh among jihadists, wrote in his *Advice to Muslim Demonstrators and Protesters* that the religion cannot be established except by the sword. When armed jihad is not conducive, one should make necessary preparations for it. Resorting to other means is not permissible except with clear injunction from scriptures, he declared.

He reiterated that democracy is anathema to Islam. Since demonstrations and protests are democratic means of change, they should be equally rejected. Furthermore, allowing them will contribute to the dissemination of democratic ideas among Muslims.

Zaydan's view, however, was criticised by Al-Shinqiti. The latter argued that both jihad and demonstrations are only the means for the ultimate end - the Islamic state. There is no problem in using less harmful ways such as demonstrations and protests as long as they lead to the same objective. He mentioned that the guiding principle in this issue is "permissibility until there is proof otherwise". Thus, to him, the onus is upon those who argue its impermissibility to provide evidence from the scriptures, not the opposite.

### **Vision of Islamic State**

Recent developments in Egypt attest to the relevance of the above two jihadist positions. The majority of Egyptians participated in democratic parliamentary elections which indicates their support. This is a clear departure from the jihadist position that democratic elections and participation in them are clearly against Islam.

Secondly, the majority of the votes were given to Islamists of the Muslim Brothers and Salafist strands who oppose jihadism. Al-Qaeda's negative attitude towards the Muslim Brothers is well recorded in Al-Zawahiri's book *Bitter Harvest*. Al-Shinqiti ruled that it is impermissible to vote for the Tunisian Islamist En-Nahda Party, an affiliate to the Muslim Brothers, and considered them as secular.

To date, developments in Egypt point to the fact that jihadists have little influence on the course of the revolution and it is unlikely that their vision of a pure Islamic state will be realised. Consequently, Al-Zawahiri and his friends will be disappointed - just as they had been with the Tunisian revolution.

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