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Jihadi Discourse in the Wake of the Arab Spring

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The fall of dictators brought about by the initial wave of the "Arab Spring" is an aspiration many Arabs dreamed about, prayed for or attempted to pursue through political channels – an exercise that for decades seemed futile. The jihadis did not settle for dreaming or praying – although there is no shortage of either in the jihadi cultural universe. Convinced by the futility of peaceful reforms, they set out on the path of jihad intent on bringing down dictators and fighting against the Western countries that they believed supported these dictators.1 For decades jihadis – despite their differences – have been in agreement that jihad is the only solution to rid Muslims of their dictators to pave the way for establishing a just society in which God's Law reigns supreme. In the words of Ayman al-Zawahiri, who has been declared by jihadi websites to be Usama Bin Ladin's successor, "there is no solution except through jihad, all other solutions are futile. Rather, other solutions would only worsen the state of dilapidation and submissiveness in which we live; [purported solutions that exclude jihad] are equivalent to treating cancer with aspirin." In doing so, unlike Islamist groups that are also driven by Islamic religious teachings of social justice but chose the electoral path to advance their agenda, jihadis have rejected the world order of nation-states and the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force. Instead, jihadis have embraced jihad as the primary means of political change. But if peaceful protests could bring down Presidents Zayn al-Din bin ʻAli of Tunisia (January 2011) and Husni Mubarak of Egypt (February 2011) in the seismic phenomenon known as the "Arab Spring," where does this leave jihadism? In view of the unpredictable nature of the events that have characterized the onset and subsequent developments of the Arab Spring, a serious attempt to anticipate its future in general, and its impact on jihadism in particular, is fraught with risks. This report therefore avoids addressing ambitious questions, such as whether the Arab Spring is a success or a failure and whether it will lead to the demise of jihadism. Instead, this report analyzes jihadi discourse since the onset of the Arab Spring in order to address two related questions: (1) why have global jihadi leaders been struggling to advance a coherent and effective response to the events of the Arab Spring, and (2) why, despite strong rhetoric of militancy, have we witnessed little action on the part of new jihadi groups that have emerged in countries that underwent regime change as a result of the Arab Spring? The pertinence of these questions lies in the consequential effects of both the Arab Spring and jihadism on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Some analysts expressed concern that the instability brought about by the Arab Spring is engendering a fertile ground for jihadis to operate in the region. Among others, Bruce Hoffman worries that it "may create new opportunities for al-Qa`ida and its allies to regroup and reorganize," and even this instability "endowed" al-Qaʻida "with new relevance." In a similar vein, others have remarked that there is a causal link between the Arab Spring and the rise of new jihadi groups, warning that this may lead to a violent conflict that would destabilize the newly elected regimes. Such concerns invariably point to cohesion on both the ideological and operational levels that jihadism is said to enjoy, suggesting the possibility that the Arab Spring serves not only to strengthen, but also to enhance its violent output.

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