

Will Mideast's Upheavals Put Extremists In Power?

By CHUCK DEVORE Posted 03/24/2011 05:09 PM ET

First in a series from a Middle East observer who just returned from the region and whose last report for IBD was "A Restive Egypt Faces Succession," nearly two weeks before the revolt began in that country.

With unrest, revolutions and civil war in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia, are al-Qaida and its "moderate" cousin, the Muslim Brotherhood, on the verge of a stunning strategic victory in the Middle East?

It's possible that this extremely negative development won't happen — that the Middle East may experience the blossoming of liberty, rule of law and respect for minority rights. It's also theoretically possible that the federal deficit may vanish next year.

How did U.S. national interests come to the precipice of suffering the worst setback since the Chinese Communists seized the world's most populous nation in 1949?

In 2008, America was wrapping up its successful surge in Iraq. Al-Qaida was a spent force, unable to mount any successful attacks on U.S. soil since 9/11. Candidate Barack Obama opposed the surge, claiming, with the anti-war left, that the only morally just war was in Afghanistan, a theater which, the narrative went, had gotten short shrift because of the unneeded war in Iraq.

Obama assumed the presidency in 2009 claiming a new beginning in foreign relations — pushing the "reset" button with U.S. rivals and enemies like Russia and the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as entire peoples, as was his intent with his Cairo speech to the Muslim world on June 4, 2009.

In retrospect, Obama's Cairo speech will be seen as the catalyst that handed Islamists the victory that decades of terrorism and pan-Islamic political maneuvering failed to spark. Pointedly, Mr. Obama's advisers saw fit to invite leaders of Egypt's banned Muslim Brotherhood to the speech, providing them with an important boost in prestige at the expense of now-former Egyptian President Mubarak's regime.

Abdullah Attai, a professor of Islamic Shariah law at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, which sponsored the president in Egypt, called the speech a historic turning point that marked the beginning of the isolation of al-Qaida. At the time, President Obama's national security advisers viewed the "isolation" of al-Qaida as a good thing. The question they should have asked themselves is: isolation from what?

Al-Qaida and its affiliates represent a branch of Islamist thought that is impatient and hyper-violent and sees itself as much at war with the apostate Muslim world as it is with the infidel West.

The Muslim Brotherhood and its myriad franchises differ from al-Qaida in method, not outcome. The Muslim Brotherhood views the existing Muslim order as in need of revival rather than bloody revolution, to be followed by confrontation with Jews, Christians and the West.

What is important for U.S. policymakers is that neither al-Qaida nor the Muslim Brotherhood is interested in the modern reformation of Islam, allowing for a separation of church and state in a pluralistic, tolerant, moderate and democratic society.

On Feb. 18, Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi, the long-exiled spiritual leader of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, made a triumphal return to his homeland to deliver a victory speech to over 200,000 people in Cairo's Tahrir Square. Al-Qaradawi, the most important Sunni Muslim religious leader, with some 40 million viewers on his Al-Jazeera program, "Sharia and Life," has fastidiously cultivated a "moderate" image in the non-Arabic-speaking world.

His words in Egypt that day were anything but moderate. Al-Qaradawi called for jihad to reconquer Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, linking the call for war with Israel with the demand that the Egyptian army break the blockade of Hamas terrorists in Gaza. His comments were met with thunderous applause.

Western journalists, with a proclivity for both laziness and shallowness, focused on Al-Qaradawi's call for "freedom and democracy" — but completely missed the point that al-Qaradawi's Muslim Brotherhood, known as the Ikhwan in Egypt, sees democracy as the means to the end of an "Islamic State by the will of the people" vs. al-Qaida's desire to achieve the same ends through violent revolution.

These same journalists ignore al-Qaradawi's vast array of damning interviews, religious edicts (fatwas) and sermons in which he has called for the creation of a United States of Islam (the recreation of the Islamic Caliphate), jihad "martyrdom operations," the conquests of America and Europe, the worldwide application of Shariah law and the extermination of all the Jews.

As the Arab world seethes with unrest, al-Qaradawi's Muslim Brotherhood and its vision for a United States of Islam represent only one possible unwelcome outcome for U.S. national security interests.

Al-Qaida's affiliates remain a potent challenger to the Brotherhood, standing to gain immensely from the soon-to-be failed state of Yemen and the rash Western military intervention in Libya, a nation that has recently contributed one-fifth of the foreign jihadi fighters in the global war on terror.

The Turks, now under the leadership of an Islamist political party, may also seek to reassert the historic role of the Ottoman Empire as the defender of the faith. Turkish support of Hamas in Gaza and distancing of their once-close relations with Israel are part of their effort to burnish their pan-Islam credentials in the region.

Finally, the Iranian Shiite theocracy is making a play too, encouraging unrest in Bahrain and oil-rich eastern Saudi Arabia while dangerously escalating the military capabilities of Hamas by clandestinely supplying them with Silkworm anti-ship missiles to threaten the Israeli navy and commercial shipping.

Hezbollah, Iran's proxy in Lebanon, possesses 40,000 rockets and already has a proven anti-shipping capability, effectively creating the specter of an Arab blockade of Israeli shipping.

Pan-Islamism was the basic glue that held the Ottoman Empire together. Arab nationalism pushed against the Ottomans and was exploited by the Allies to hasten the defeat of the Ottomans in 1918. After WWII, pan-Arabism was the driving force in the region, with dynamic leaders like Egypt's Gamal Nasser seeking, without lasting success, to fuse Arab nationalism and socialism.

Now the Middle East appears headed for a protracted season of pan-Islamic jockeying. The Muslim Brotherhood and its rivals dream of caliphates centered in Cairo, Tehran or Istanbul, cleansing the land of both Jew and Christian and reasserting Islam as a dominant, vigorous and conquering faith.

Sadly, pan-Islamism, just as pan-Arabism before it, will fail its people. Focused on virtually-impossible-to-obtain unity and external matters like confrontation with Israel, pan-Islamism will inevitably ignore internal economic development, rule of law, the fostering of democratic institutions and the protection of religious minorities, like Egypt's 8 million Coptic Christians.

In this, the Muslim Brotherhood's likely long-term failure will open up the door for al-Qaida and its successors to mount a comeback from their soon-to-be-expanded havens in Yemen and Libya.

- DeVore served in the California Legislature from 2004 to 2010. He is a lieutenant colonel (retired) in the U.S. Army Reserve and served as a special assistant for foreign affairs in the Reagan-era Pentagon. He studied abroad at the American University in Cairo in 1984-85.

<http://www.investors.com/NewsAndAnalysis/Article.aspx?id=567042&p=3>