How the Arab Spring's Prisoner Releases Have Helped the Jihadi Cause

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Articles & Testimony

The emptying of prisons in countries affected by the Arab Spring has often been a good thing but, unfortunately, jihadists have also been part of this wave of releases.

The investigation of the devastating Sept. 11 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, that killed American ambassador Christopher Stevens -- limited as it is by security concerns that hampered the FBI's access to the site -- has begun to focus on a Libya-based Egyptian, Muhammad Jamal (aka Abu Ahmad al Masri). As a detailed *Wall Street Journal* report **(http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390444549204578020373444418316.html)** explains, Jamal is notable not only for having fighters under his command and operating militant training camps in the Libyan desert, but also for having recently gotten out of Egyptian prison.

This latter fact makes Jamal part of a trend that has gone largely unremarked upon in the public sphere since the beginning of the "Arab Spring" uprisings: prisons in affected countries have been emptied, inmates scattering after being released or breaking free. In many cases, it is a *good* thing that prisoners have gone free: the Arab dictatorships were notorious for unjustly incarcerating political prisoners, and abusing them in captivity. But jihadists have also been part of this wave of releases, and we are now beginning to see the fruits of the talent pool that is back on the streets.

Many commentators have remarked that the jihadist movement has shown increased vigor recently, including al Qaeda's North African affiliate and the various Ansar al Sharia groups that emerged in multiple countries, but the prison releases have been an important part of this story that analysts have generally ignored.

Prisoners have gone free for a variety of reasons. Muammar Qaddafi's government used these releases as an offensive tactic early after the uprisings, setting prisoners free in rebellious areas in order to create strife there. As the rebellion continued, some prison governors decided for their own reasons (perhaps as a way of defecting) to empty prisons they were charged with guarding. Chaos allowed some escapes, as guards afraid of reprisals fled their posts; in other cases gunmen attacked prisons in order to release the inmates. And regimes that experienced less chaotic transitions, including Tunisia but especially Egypt, have been hesitant to continue imprisoning virtually anybody jailed by the old regime, including violent Islamists with blood on their hands.

The potential for danger was actually apparent very early in the events of the Arab Spring. In January 2011, even before Egypt's Hosni Mubarak was toppled from power, it was widely reported that thousands of prisoners had escaped from Egyptian jails, including militants. A lengthy hagiographical account of how "the mujahedin" had escaped from the Abu Za'bal prison soon appeared on the Ansar al Mujahedin Network, a jihadist web forum.

After Mubarak's fall, many people imprisoned by the old regime were let back on the streets. Hani al Saba'i, a figure with deep ties to the jihadist movement who runs the London-based Al Maqrizi Center for Historical Studies, published several lists of names of militant figures who had been released, beginning in February 2011. As he wrote on February 27, "This release is one of the positive outcomes of this popular Egyptian revolution that we hope to conclude with the application of the Islamic sharia."

Nor were jail breaks and prisoner releases limited to Egypt. They have also helped to change the shape of both jihadist and also more moderate Islamist currents in Tunisia, Libya, and also Yemen. Underscoring this, a September article **(http://jihadology.net/2012/09/22/al-masadat-media-foundation-presents-a-new-article-from-abu-sad-al-amili-support-for-an%E1%B9%A3ar-al-shariah-in-yemen-4-provocative-message-message-to-the-brothers-released-in-th/)** from jihadist intellectual Abu Sa'd al Amili directed toward members of an al Qaeda front group in Yemen extols the virtues of imprisonment. "Prison might be a period of education or further strengthening for the prisoner," he wrote. "God the Almighty is preparing the prisoner for great events and heavy responsibilities that he could not have borne before his imprisonment or if he had remained free."

Moving beyond the rather prominent case of Jamal, we can see how other figures from Egypt's jihadist movement have re-emerged. Most notorious among them is Muhammad al Zawahiri, the brother of al Qaeda's current leader and a former member of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad. Zawahiri played a prominent role in encouraging jihadis to join in the recent attacks on the U.S. embassy in Cairo, and American officials told the *Wall Street Journal* that he has also helped the aforementioned Muhammad Jamal connect with his brother, the al Qaeda chief.

Other released Egyptian inmates seem to have returned to operational and media roles, including Murjan Salim, who has been directing jihadis to training camps in Libya. Figures like Shaykh Jalal al Din Abu al Fatuh and Shaykh Ahmad 'Ashush, among others, have helped loosely reorganize networks through media outlets al-Bayyan and al-Faruq.

In Tunisia, one can see a rise in vigilantism and organized violence. While not all violence can be linked to Ansar al Sharia in Tunisia (AST), many of the bigger shows of force were: it helped instigate attacks protesting the showing of the unjustifiably controversial film Persepolis, a riot in La Marsa, and the attack at the U.S. embassy in Tunis.

AST's leader Sayf Allah bin Husayn (better known as Abu Iyadh al Tunisi) had previously been imprisoned since 2003 for involvement in terrorism abroad, before being released in the general amnesty of March 2011. Abu Iyadh, who in a June 2003 interview with the London-based Arabic daily *Al Sharq al Awsat* said he was "proud" to call himself a terrorist, most notably helped facilitate the assassination of Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud in Afghanistan two days prior to the 9/11 attacks. In fact, prominent AST members have claimed that the organization was born during periods of imprisonment, when "communal prayer time served as a forum for

discussion and refining ideas that would be put into practice on release."

In Libya, many former prisoners, including some leaders of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, decided to forsake armed struggle and join the political process instead. But other released prisoners returned to jihadi violence. Mohammed al Zahawi and Shaykh Nasir al Tarshani, the top two leaders of Katibat Ansar al Sharia in Benghazi, which has been implicated in the Sept. 11 consulate attack, both spent years in Qaddafi's notorious Abu Salim prison. Abu Sufyan bin Qumu, formerly imprisoned in both Guantánamo Bay and Abu Salim, leads the shadowy Ansar al Sharia group in Derna, from where he has recruited individuals to his cause since the Libyan uprising began.

While we have not seen concerted insurgent campaigns, the openness of the transitional societies (which is likely to be a net positive in the long term) has allowed jihadis to regroup, recruit, and spread their message. Ultimately, prisoner releases are one of the untold causes behind the recent jihadi rebound, and the full effects almost certainly are yet to be seen. It is worth recalling that al Qaeda's Yemeni branch, which reconstituted after a prison break in February 2006, did not really display its outward strength and capabilities until three years later, in 2009.

Unfortunately, the U.S. doesn't have a great deal of direct options for addressing this phenomenon. Some standard tools, like developing U.S.-assisted programming through the Global Counterterrorism Forum focusing on judiciary reform or prisoner reintegration, might seem like good fixes at first blush, but there are specific problems. First, as long as released jihadists aren't committing crimes, they won't be arrested -- and the U.S. shouldn't push governments to arrest people who are innocent of (apparent) wrongdoing, a move that would be too reminiscent of the old regimes. Second, political will is a big issue: Egypt's new government seems hesitant to keep any militants in prison, even those with blood on their hands, and judiciary reform is unlikely to solve the problem of political will. Third, prisoner reintegration has a mixed record, and a lot depends on how a government goes about it. Saudi Arabia has been (relatively) successful because it throws a lot of money at prisoners, giving them a huge incentive not to return to the jihad. Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen probably lack the resources to copy that model. (Plus, reintegration programs can't deal with *already released* prisoners, who can't be forced into these programs after their freedom has been granted.)

So the U.S.'s best option is likely attempting to ensure that it has sound regional partners for counterterrorism efforts, in particular, partners who adhere to a higher level of human rights standards than the old dictatorships. And trying to get this kind of cooperation from states in the region will be hard and uncertain work. You can think of this as part of the dark side of the Arab uprisings: It's right to be enthusiastic about the democratic changes that the protests have brought about, but then, not all the political actors empowered by those changes are equally benign. The continued potential for danger is real.

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