

Cairo needs help to avoid al-Qaeda's grip

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By Ahmed Rashid

Despite victory for democratic forces in Egypt, current instability may still give al-Qaeda and other extremist Islamic groups the chance to expand their influence. Egypt needs international help quickly to ensure the reform agenda is speeded up, and that extremists cannot lay down roots.

For centuries Egypt has been the heart of the Arab world; its trend setter and ideas centre. But it is also the ideological home of early 20th century Islamic fundamentalism, and the more modern Islamic extremism that followed. Al-Qaeda, and other extremist Egyptian groups, will not want democracy to settle, because the democracy "contagion" could spread throughout the Islamic world, undermining the extremists message.

Al-Qaeda had set down a marker just three weeks before the current revolution erupted. On January 1 militants bombed a Coptic church in Alexandria, killing 21 worshippers. This was a brazen attempt to create Muslim-Christian tensions, and similar to ploys in Iraq and Pakistan.

During the recent revolt al-Qaeda websites urged followers to pursue "jihad" against the regime, rather than the peaceful demonstrations. Wisely, the Muslim majority ignored them, making a point of standing hand in hand with Egypt's Christians. Even so, whipping up anti-Christian (or anti-Shia) hysteria remains a plausible strategy for al-Qaeda among young Muslims.

Extremism has deep roots in Egypt. Al-Qaeda No 2. the fervent ideologue Ayman al'Zawahiri, once headed Egypt's "Islamic jihad", and despite years in exile he has sought to revive the Islamic movement in his own country. Over the years he has attacked those who tried to seize the baton of Islam in Egypt, including the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Brotherhood is no longer a carrier for extremism. It was born in 1928 as a vehicle for anti-colonialism, and later in struggles against British, American and communist yoke. It's revolutionary potential was forged in a great intellectual ferment, first by its Egyptian founders and later by Pakistani ideologues, who wrote of an Islamic world ruled by sharia. But in the last four decades the Brotherhood has sought to take part in democratic processes, and rejected violent jihad. Al-Qaeda condemns it for selling out to the west.

In the weeks ahead, if instability continues, al-Qaeda will doubtless start an assassination campaign against Brotherhood leaders, to discredit them, and maintain that they cannot speak on behalf of Islam. These are tactics al-Qaeda has used in the past in other Muslim countries. Their other aim will be to discredit the new regime, through the assassinations of top government and army officials. Creating inter-sectarian divisions in the population, such as attacking Christian targets, is also likely. The ultimate aim will be to force the army to bring another autocrat to power, and to use that figure as a punching bag to discredit the democratic movement.

The Egyptian people have shown incredible courage to get where they are now. But the revolution is not over. The extremists have yet to try to pull it apart. Al-Qaeda knows that its worst enemy is a conscious and responsible democracy movement. Its ideological aim will be to bring the imposition of Islam to the top of Egypt's political agenda, rather than the creation of a fair and workable democracy. Egypt and the west must avoid such a trap.

To do so, Egypt needs immediate economic and financial support to kick start the economy and keep the democratic movement on track. The west must also nudge Israel forcefully to help Egypt by going back to the peace process with the Palestinians, thus not allowing extremists to gain from further Arab-Israeli divisions. It would be tragic if the west acts too slowly or tries to retain the status quo thereby giving space to al-Qaeda and other extremist groups to rally in Egypt and create a new kind of chaos.

Source: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/4607fde8-3947-11e0-97ca-00144feabdc0.html>

*The writer's latest book is *Descent into Chaos*. A revised edition of his *Taliban* was published last summer.*