



# A Cautionary Tale

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The U.S. government's vast apparatus for data collection touches every aspect of human activity. But how can a system that seemingly has the capability to know absolutely everything still get major events so wrong?

A new book by former CIA Deputy Director Michael Morell detailed one such case. Morell revealed that not only did the intelligence community fail to predict the advent of the series of popular uprisings starting in 2011 known as the "Arab Spring," but also believed that the movement would "damage al-Qaeda by undermining the group's narrative."

The basic problem was that the Obama administration defined the challenge in the Middle East as generic "violent extremism" and refused to acknowledge that the challenge of Islamic radicalism per se. Consequently, the State Department praised the 2012 electoral victories of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, asserting that the increasing influence of such radical groups was helpful because "people who once might have gone into al Qaeda see an opportunity for a legitimate Islamism." By this thinking, a win for nonviolent extremism was ipso facto a defeat for terrorism. One senior State Department official said the elections meant "the war on terror is over."

Three years later, we can see what a romantic notion this all was. Terrorism is more widespread in the Middle East than ever, and Egypt's military ejected the Muslim Brotherhood from power. "The Arab Spring was a boon to Islamic extremists across both the Middle East and North Africa," Morell said, and "from a counterterrorism perspective, the Arab Spring had turned to winter."

The CIA should have paid attention to what the terrorists were saying. Extremist movements are opportunistic and value disruptive political change, particularly when it dislodges authoritarian governments that have been their longtime enemies. A letter written by Osama bin Laden in April 2011, and captured during the raid on his compound in Abbottabad a week later, showed the terror leader was thrilled with the prospects of the Arab Spring. "What we are witnessing these days of consecutive revolutions is a great and glorious event," he wrote. Bin Laden believed it was "the beginning of a new era for the whole [Muslim] nation" and "the most important events that the nation has witnessed for centuries."

Bin Laden's successor, Ayman al-Zawahri, publicly said that al-Qaeda was happy to see the downfall of Egyptian military rule whether by the ballot or the bullet, and claimed credit for the Arab Spring as a logical consequence of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. From their point of view, the Arab Spring was pushing the Mideast toward hard-line rule by Sharia law, which was al-Qaeda's strategic objective. The American view that this somehow constituted defeat seemed strange.

Many people assume that the process of developing intelligence is purely objective and fact-based. However, the vast amounts of information the government collects must be sifted and evaluated by analysts who bring their own perspectives and assumptions. These products are reviewed by upper-level policymakers, many of whom are political appointees who have their own priorities. Bringing bad news is not often one of them. The narrative of the Arab Spring as a great popular uprising, throwing off the shackles of authoritarian rule and peacefully achieving the dream of political Islam, was a much more attractive storyline going into the 2012 election than predicting a future of terror-fueled chaos.

The Arab Spring intelligence failure is a cautionary tale when approaching other issues requiring objective assessments, such as Iran's intentions regarding nuclear weapons, Russia's next moves in Eastern Europe or China's expansion in the Pacific. It illustrates how policymakers can be in a position to command virtually unlimited information and yet know so very little.