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Commentary: Threats to watch in 2012

By ARNAUD DE BORCHGRAVE
1/5/2011

On Dec. 18, 2010, a police slap of a vegetable-cum-fruit peddler in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid triggered an "Arab Spring" that no one had forecast and that quickly spawned a long, dark Arab winter.

Before the end of January 2011, violent unrest had spread to Egypt. By Feb. 11, after 18 days of riots, the 30-year dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak ended. Less than a week later, Libya exploded. And on Oct. 20, Moammar Gadhafi, Libya's dictator for 42 years, was mauled and killed by angry revolutionaries.

The top military man in Tripoli is Abdelkrim El Haj, the former al-Qaida operative in Libya who was captured during Gadhafi's regime, turned over to the United States, renditioned to, and tortured by, Thai authorities. He now says he isn't holding the United States accountable but expects "those responsible to be brought to trial."

Former close U.S. ally Egypt will soon fall under the sway of an Islamist Parliament (40 percent Muslim Brotherhood, 25 percent Salafist, or Muslim extremist). Liquor is already out of Cairo stores and can now only be sold to foreigners from locations yet to be determined. Tourism, once 15 percent of national revenue, is down to 5 percent.

The outlook for a Palestinian state is darker still than before. Palestinian extremists are in the ascendancy again as some 340,000 Israeli settlers in the West Bank keep expanding and

strengthening defenses. They have no intention of leaving or of living under Palestinian sovereignty. A good bet for 2012: a third intifada.

In Iraq, the last U.S. troops have left but some 14,000 Americans remain -- half of them assigned to the largest U.S. Embassy in the world with diplomatic passports and the other half, private security contractors. Already, the threat of sectarian civil war looms between Sunni and the Shiite Muslims now in power.

In today's Iraq, Iran and its Shiite allies, have more influence than the United States. And 2012 should tell whether the \$1 trillion U.S. war effort and its 4,400 killed in action and 33,000 wounded (plus an estimated 100,000 Iraqis killed) was the disaster forecast by some prior to the 2003 U.S. invasion.

The end of 2014 is also the end to U.S. military involvement in the Afghan war. What happens after that is the big unknown.

The United States has the clock and Taliban have the time. The Afghan army will require \$7 billion-\$10 billion a year in U.S. aid to fight on. Will Congress continue to vote such big numbers? It didn't in Vietnam in 1975 -- and resistance to a Communist takeover folded.

Iran is the big unknown in the black swan aviary.

U.S. President Barack Obama, his new generals at the Department of Defense and intelligence chiefs at 17 agencies are firmly aligned against Israeli pre-emption against Iran's nuclear facilities. The key ones are underground and even with Israel's new, U.S.-made deep penetration ordnance, nothing is less certain than the ability to set Iran's nuclear timetable back by more than a year or two.

Some -- e.g., Henry Kissinger -- argue that we should be engaging Iran in a multilateral international solution, along with Russia, China, India and Pakistan, for ending the Afghan war.

The estimated \$1 trillion-\$3 trillion in precious minerals, including uranium, that lie deep underground in Afghanistan could form the centerpiece lure to accelerate an end to hostilities with a coalition government in Kabul.

In light of the rapidly unfolding crises of 2011, the reluctance of U.S. intelligence agencies to forecast beyond next five years is understandable. As Robert Gates, serving as U.S. secretary of defense, noted two months into NATO's intervention in Libya, "If you'd asked me four months ago if we'd be in Libya today, I would have asked, 'What were you smoking?'"

Al-Qaida has vanished from news media and most have assumed that the killing of its leader Osama bin Laden by U.S. Navy SEALs May 2 put an end to the threat of a terrorist weapon of mass destruction in a major U.S. city.

The killing of major underground leaders is frequently a spur to followers to avenge their death. Terrorism has been the weapon of the weak against the strong from time immemorial. Today, the

arc of instability, from West to east Africa to Pakistan to Bangladesh has any number of al-Qaida copycat sympathizers.

Al-Qaida ceased to be centrally directed long before bin Laden's death. Tomorrow, an unmanned drone, launched from a cargo ship a few miles off New York could be the carrier of deadly pestilence.

The Preventive Action's annual report for 2012 is designed to overcome the lack of forecasting ability in the intelligence community by developing a list of plausible human-generated contingencies of relative importance to U.S. national interests, grouped according to levels or categories of risk associated with various types of instability or conflict into three tiers:

The 30 contingencies were sent to a wide selection of more than 300 government officials, policy analysts, academics and journalists for their confidential feedback.

These are the Top 10 that directly threaten the U.S. homeland and are likely to trigger U.S. military involvement:

- A mass casualty attack on the U.S. homeland or on a treaty ally.
- A severe North Korean crisis (e.g., armed provocations, internal political instability, advances in nuclear weaponry).
- A major military incident with China involving U.S. or allied forces.
- An Iranian nuclear crisis (e.g., surprise advances in nuclear weapons/delivery capability, Israeli response).
- A highly disruptive cyberattack on U.S. critical infrastructure (e.g., telecommunications, electrical power, pipeline output, transportation and emergency services).
- A significant increase in drug trafficking violence in Mexico that spills over into the United States.
- Severe internal instability in Pakistan triggered by a civil-military crisis or terror attacks.
- Political instability in Saudi Arabia that endangers global oil supplies.
- A U.S.-Pakistan military confrontation, triggered by a terror attack or U.S. counter-terror.
- Intensification of the European sovereign debt crisis that leads to the collapse of the euro, triggering a double-edged transatlantic crisis.

Happy New Year!