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Africa: The Gold Mine of Al-Qaeda and Global Jihad

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Introduction

The interest and presence of global Jihad groups in Africa is not new, particularly in the eastern and northern parts of the continent. Yet, more recently, in the wake of political violence in Sudan and Somalia, it seems that Africa is becoming a viable region for Al-Qaeda. This has manifested itself through – organized Jihadi radicalism, and self-radicalized sympathizers of global Jihad, which follow the strategy and doctrines of Al-Qaeda and its supportive clerics and scholars. In the past year we have witnessed a growing presence of new formed Jihadi groups in Africa, which use old and more recent

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violent conflicts to radicalize African Islamic elements, recruit support, and bring the African arena under the Jihadi “global umbrella.”

Recently, a new article published by a virtual magazine of supporters of global Jihad—*Sada al-Jihad* (Echo of Jihad)—has very clearly sketched the new direction of Al-Qaeda or global Jihad – towards Africa. The magazine, which celebrated in June 2006 its 7th issue, appears to be an alternative to the “late” popular Jihadi virtual magazine *Sawt al-Jihad*, which was published by Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia. It disappeared after the severe and successful measures taken by the Saudi authorities against the Saudi branch of Al-Qaeda.

The article in Arabic, titled “Al-Qaeda is moving to Africa” by Abu Azzam al-Ansari provides us with an analysis of all the possible advantages of Africa as a battlefield and greenhouse for global Jihad. Here is the translation of the full text of the article, which speaks very clearly for itself.²

Abu Azzam al-Ansari, “Al-Qaeda is moving to Africa”

The interest of the Mujahidin of Al-Qaeda in Africa is an old one but has progressed slowly. Al-Qaeda has always been aware of the importance of this huge continent and since its emergence attempted at “feeling its pulse.” Al-Qaeda has carried out there many operations and had a presence there. This all

² Abu Azzam al-Ansari, “Al-Qaeda tattajih nahwa Ifrikyia” (Al-Qaeda is moving to Africa), *Sada al-Jihad*, no. 7 (June 2006), pp. 27-30.

proves the awareness by Al-Qaeda of the importance of this region from many dimensions, as seen also by observers.

Looking at the formative period of Al-Qaeda we can see how many of Al-Qaeda's military operatives and members came from the various regions of this continent. Some of the most famous operatives came from North Africa—Egypt, Libya, Algeria, and Mauritania. It points out the Jihadi expansion in these areas, and the expertise and skills of the adherents of Al-Qaeda doctrines in a continent where there is a lot of scientific progress. We can also find that the Jihadi doctrines, which are spread in Africa, are stronger than in many other regions. The peak of modern Jihad has emerged mostly in some of the countries of this huge continent.

We can find the following operations that reflect the focus of the Mujahidin on Africa:

- Many operations against Western targets such as in the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.
- The big campaign in Somalia where they managed to deport the American occupier.
- Al-Qaeda has been active in the Sudan for a period of time, where it was involved in military operations against the infidel John Garang.

- After September 2001, Al-Qaeda and its supporters carried out number of attacks, such as in Mombassa, in Jerba/Tunisia, in Casablanca, and in Sharm al-Sheikh and Sinai.

The Mujahidin have had a prominent role in North and East Africa, which has so far ended with the recent declaration by Osama bin Laden of a war against the Crusaders that plan to open a front in Darfur/West Sudan.

There is no doubt that Al-Qaeda and the Mujahidin perceive the significance of the African regions for the military campaign against the Crusaders. Many people sense that this continent has not yet found its proper expected role and the next stages of the conflict will see the presence of Africa in the battlefield. Among the most significant advantages of Africa over other regions we can find the following:

- The Jihadi doctrines are spread in many African countries—Egypt, Algeria, Sudan, Mauritania, Morocco, Libya, Somalia, Eritrea, and Chad. These countries and others produced many Mujahidin who irrigated the lands of Islam with their blood and sacrificed themselves for the sake of Allah. This Jihadi expansion has old roots in many of the African countries.
- The political and military conditions in most of the African continent, the broad weakness of its governments, and the internal fighting and corruption of these regimes, ease the ability of the Mujahidin to move, plan, and organize themselves, far from being seen. They enjoy in Africa easier

operational abilities than in other countries, which have effective security, intelligence, and military capacities.

- This general weakness brought about numerous situations of tribal conflicts in many African countries, and hotfired civil wars that produced groups and individuals willing to heroically sacrifice themselves. If these people could be channeled into the line of the Jihad they will have enormous effect in the defense of Islam and the Muslims.
- The wars and conflicts in Africa provide a gold opportunity for the Mujahidin to easily move between different African countries, without any surveillance, and in most cases need only the finance.
- The above mentioned conditions provide huge amount of weapons and military equipment easy to obtain and in most cases much cheaper than in other regions. Weapons are found all over Africa in larger numbers than in any other continent. In many African countries there is no house without a variety of weapons for either offensive or defensive objects.
- The geographical position of Africa is unique and may ease the way for the Mujahidin to take advantage of it, especially that Africa is linked to other continents. It is easy to operate from it through the straits, rivers, and seas, and the continental and maritime routes. If the Mujahidin take advantage of this geography it would have an immense effect on the campaign against the enemy. The Crusaders use this region to transfer weapons and equipment, they control the straits and seas, and use these routes to shift oil to the rest of the world. Targeting these routes will be fatal for the Crusaders, and will harm their efforts and energies.
- We should also bear in mind that Africa is also one of the closer routes to Palestine, which might serve as direct and indirect support for this conflict. The violent conflict in Darfur against the Crusaders will no doubt

create the emergence of the Jihadi trend in Egypt, which will effect the general atmosphere in Egypt, which is a neighbor of Palestine and maintains solid links to the Jews and the Crusaders. It might ease the shift of the Jihad into the regions close to Palestine. It might promote the struggle in Sinai and serve as a motive for more people to join the Jihad. Alongside the growth of the Jihad there will be developments on the doctrinal field from targeting only the Jews in Sinai to targeting them within Palestine, through smuggling weapons and warriors and carrying out operations. It might take a relatively long period but it is the time to start hotfiring a circle of fire around Palestine from every side. Iraq is also close to Palestine, and the wars there support at present the Jihad in Palestine as well, and will turn in the near future into a direct support and practical involvement in this Jihad.

- One of the prominent advantages of Africa is the general condition of poverty and the social needs in most countries. It will enable the Mujahidin to provide some finance and welfare, thus, posting there some of their influential operatives.
- Many of the African people have broad education and scientific progress. If they join the ranks of the Mujahidin they could contribute a lot to the Jihad.
- Most of the people of this continent are Muslims. The most famous Islamic trend, which the Mujahidin can approach, is the various Sufi groups. The Sufis have no doubt a huge presence in Africa, more than in any other continent. Many Mujahidin in other countries have learned that working with the Sufis is easier than working with any other trend, such as the Shi`is or the Communists. The Christian presence in this region is weak, they are not able to attack the Muslims, and if they did so it would be easy to defeat them.

- There are in Africa nests of continuing conflicts between the true Muslims and their rivals, such as in Somalia, Algeria, or the Christians of Southern Sudan. There is potential of the renewal of the conflict in Egypt, especially if the government goes on with its oppression as a reply to the operations. It might lead to an explosion, whose signs are already seen.
- Another advantage is the links to Europe through North Africa, what eases the move from there to carry out attacks.
- Last advantage is the fact that Africa is rich in economic sources, oil and raw materials. This is very useful for the Mujahidin in the medium and long term.

In general, this continent has an immense significance. Whoever looks at Africa can see that it does not enjoy the interest, efforts, and activity it deserves in the war against the Crusaders. This is a continent with a lot of potential, advantages, and exploiting this potential will benefit the Jihad a lot. It will promote achieving the expected targets of Jihad. Africa is a fertile soil for the advance of Jihad and the Jihadi trend.

Analysis and Conclusion

To sum up the article, Africa is an unexplored gold mine for global Jihad, with so many opportunities for the promotion of Jihad, especially in three main desired fronts—Palestine, Europe, and Egypt. The article is only one link in a chain of signs of a growing involvement of Al-Qaeda and groups that support its global Jihad, in Africa. In recent months there is also a rapid growing

participating of supporters of global Jihad in providing information about the “hottest” African conflicts, such as in Somalia and Sudan. This article is therefore, an attempt to direct the interest of the Jihadists towards Africa as a geopolitical strategy.

Yet, in addition to the clear analysis and conclusion in the article, there are two significant elements to note here:

- The author is not necessarily a Salafi-Jihadi, and does not use typical Salafi terminology and discourse. Furthermore, despite the use of the term Al-Qaeda in the title and the content, he seems to aim his words to the Mujahidin in general, not to a certain group, Islamist trend, or specific strategy. The main element here is the call for the emergence of as many centers of conflict as possible, which will create “groups of Mujahidin,” united by the focus on Africa and not by a certain doctrine. This is important and might reflect one or two present situations, or both. First, the African environment cannot produce one dogmatic group or Jihadi doctrine. The same as Africa and most African societies are divided and lack unity, which he views as an advantage for the Mujahidin, it is therefore, naturally affecting the emergence of a variety of Jihadi groups. Second, Al-Qaeda itself has either compromised in other regions with the same phenomenon—in Iraq for instance—or encouraged the emergence of self-radicalized Jihadists in various places—Europe for instance. Al-Qaeda is therefore an “umbrella ideology and strategy” for the “Mujahidin” and thus, the growing involvement in Africa will be on the same lines. The African conflicts that are supposed to be exploited by the Mujahidin to establish a growing presence there are not going to be directed by any central command. They

should serve as a means to affect recruitment and support for the more important targets of global Jihad in Egypt, Europe, and above all to create a Jihadi circle of violence around Israel.

- A new and surprising element in the article is the pragmatic view and approach of the Sufis, unlike the traditional Jihadi-Salafi anti-Sufi position, which originates from the Wahhabi disqualification of Sufism and Sufi movements. The line of thought of approaching the Sufis, with their huge presence in Africa, is another sign of the pragmatic thinking of the new generation of global Jihad—dogmatism and central command are no longer a typical position. There is also no sign of Takfiri positions. Therefore, pragmatism and the attempt to compromise with the local conditions and adopt them, increase the weight of local conflicts, local Jihadi groups, and the focus on each conflict separately. There is no call for Jihadi unity in Africa, but for more chaos that will serve the interests of global Jihad in other, more important, regions.

The pragmatic approach of exploiting Africa can be viewed also by an important African element, which is missing here—South Africa. This huge country cannot serve as a greenhouse for Jihadi exploitation of Africa – it is far from the more important targets, there are no internal conflicts, there is well-organized central government, no free trade of arms, and hence no real prospects for promoting the global Jihad.

Another important key element, which is ignored here for some reason whatsoever, is Nigeria. Nigeria is the most populous state in Africa and is

divided in rough lines between a Christian south and a Muslim north, with some Muslim enclaves in the south among the Yoruba tribe. In the north, where radical Islam rules, 12 Shari'ah states have been established since 2000, as part of the heritage of the great African Muslim scholar, Othman Dan Fodio. The latter declared Jihad against Muslim heretics and against the Europeans at the beginning of the nineteenth century and established the Sultanate of Sokoto, which was governed by Shari'ah rule. Moreover, in 2003 a new organization under the name of Taliban Nigeria was founded in the north. It still exists and as one can see from its name, it is influenced by the Taliban.

Moreover, this infiltration of al-Qaeda is based and facilitated sometimes, by the heritage of African Salafist or Islamist scholars such as Othman Dan Fodio in Nigeria, who influenced not just Nigerian Muslims but also all western African Muslims and the African American Diaspora in the Caribbean. Other such scholars are the Libyan Omar al-Mukhtar, who fought the Italian occupation, the Somalian Seyyid Muhammad Abdullah Hassan, who fought against the British, the Italians, as well as the Ethiopians, and other less known Islamic scholars. There is also a spillover of the Islamist or Salafist influence into other African states such as Uganda, or Benin, or even the Sahel states, where the Algerian based GSPC organization is operating.

This spillover is prominent also in the context of the continuance of the long struggle between Islam and Christianity over the souls of the Sub-Sahara African Muslims. Whereas in the past, there was a somewhat roughly clear-cut

division between a dominantly Muslim north and a dominantly Christian south, while the rain forests or the equator was the border, it is not so easy now. Many converts to Islam are found every single year in what was once a Christian population, even in the unlikely countries of South Africa or Angola, so that the al-Qaeda infiltration into Africa might be seen as a real threat on the long run, taking into account its using the grave social and economic situation prevailing in most African states now.

Another factor, which helps al-Qaeda and global Jihad in infiltrating Africa, is the Islamic influence of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States. As from the Middle Ages, many African Muslims went to study Islamic studies in al-Azhar university and went into a pilgrimage to Mecca. On the twentieth century and even throughout the nineteenth century, some of those Muslims who went to Saudi Arabia and Egypt were influenced by the radical Islamists, whether Wahhabism or the Muslim brotherhood. When they returned to their places of origin they preached the radical Islamists agenda. Moreover, many Gulf-based Islamic charities participate in this Da'wah campaign, while, in the meantime, helping out the African peoples and converting some of them first to the cause of Islam and then even to radical Islam in the process.

As for the African Islamic Internet forums in Arabic, it is interesting to note that they are operating so far, only in Sudan, Chad and Somalia. It partly coincides with the spheres of al-Qaeda's activity in the continent appearing in the article. But, it is due in great part to the presence of more Arabic-speaking people in

these countries. Sudan and Somalia are part of the Arab League, and as such, are seen as part of the Arab and Islamic world, while in Chad many Arabs reside, especially those who came there from Sudan and Libya. Thus, it is not surprising to find in the Chadian forums much information concerning the conflict in Darfur.

Somalia and the Guinea Gulf in western Africa are the main theater of operations for pirates nowadays. If al-Qaeda happens to ally itself with those pirates, it might provoke a chain of maritime terrorism against world shipping, which sails along these waters. Taking into consideration the oil fields stretching along the Guinea Gulf, this future maritime terrorism might harm world economy. Although up till now, al-Qaeda attacked only two targets at sea in the Aden Gulf, still one has to take seriously this threat to world economy.

In radical Jihadi eyes Africa is therefore just a base, maybe even a future alternative base to Iraq or Afghanistan. Yet, the West should carefully look at the present and future Jihadi expansion in that continent. It might become a much bigger threat to the Arab world, Israel, Europe, and Western interests, than other present arenas of Jihadi activity. The logic of the strategists of global Jihad is becoming more pragmatic, reflects lessons of past mistakes, and provides the new generations of Mujahidin a free hand to adjust to local circumstances with no Salafi dogmatism. If we should have pointed out whose logic is behind the article and this strategy, it would be more likely to think about a disciple of Abu

Mus`ab al-Suri rather than the older generation of Al-Qaeda or Osama bin Laden.