

## **Al-Qaeda's Influence in Sub-Saharan Africa: Myths, Realities and Possibilities**

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### *Abstract*

*This article examines the question whether Al-Qaeda has been able to develop significant influence in sub-Saharan Africa. After reviewing what the historical record indicates about activities which have some links to the Al-Qaeda network, and discussing what some observers have asserted, the article describes some key challenges that Al-Qaeda faces in its quest to gain influence in sub-Saharan Africa. It concludes with a brief look at policy implications.*

Security practitioners and policymakers in the U.S. have been increasingly worried about the potential for Al-Qaeda to gain influence in impoverished, developing countries with large Muslim populations. According to some predictions, we should expect by now to see a significant Al-Qaeda presence—from planning and operational cells to training camps and hubs of ideological radicalization—throughout sub-Saharan Africa. As one senior U.S. Naval officer stated in his 2005 Congressional testimony, “Africa is an emerging haven for our enemies in the Global War on Terrorism.” [1] In a February 2006 *Armed Forces Journal* article, Kurt Shillinger argued that “southern Africa comprises a mix of economic strengths and state weaknesses, demographics and social “seams,” and historical links and attitudes that provide ample attraction and opportunity for terror-related activity.” [2] He also cites a U.S. State Department report as declaring: “It is unclear to what extent terrorist groups are present in South Africa; however, the activity of Al-Qaeda and affiliated persons or groups in South Africa and Nigeria, home to Africa’s largest Muslim population, is of growing concern.” [3] And yet, while we have indeed seen some local or regional groups in North Africa affiliate themselves with Al-Qaeda and its global jihad, as well as a few (albeit dramatic) examples of the terror network’s presence in a few East African countries, Al-Qaeda’s overall presence in this vast region is actually quite limited. The African continent is nearly four times the size of the United States, and yet there is far less Al-Qaeda presence there than in Western Europe or even the U.S.

In one recent example, in December 2009 a young Nigerian man named Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who was radicalized online and trained in Yemen, attempted to attack a U.S. airliner heading to Detroit by detonating explosives smuggled in his underwear. [4] The media frenzy that followed was accompanied by the U.S. placing Nigeria on its list of countries of concern, meaning Nigerian citizens traveling to the United States would now be subject to additional scrutiny. And yet, this was just one instance - one man from a region with hundreds of millions of Muslims. Such a stark exception to the norm is quite telling; why have we not seen more similar cases? Many other relevant questions must also be asked, such as: Why have the

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messages and ideology of Al-Qaeda not found resonance among the large (and almost entirely impoverished) Muslim communities of sub-Saharan Africa? What forces may constrain the attraction of joining the global jihad in sub-Saharan Africa? And, perhaps most important for policymakers, what can or should be done to exacerbate Al-Qaeda's challenges in sub-Saharan Africa, and ensure that their presence and influence remains limited?

This discussion begins with an overview of what we know primarily about Al-Qaeda's historical presence on the African continent, starting from North Africa, where remnants of an Algerian extremist group aligned with Al-Qaeda in 2007, to Sudan, Kenya and Tanzania, where the terrorist network has found some semblance of support and operational safe haven. The article then turns to look at some of the more prominent and troubling assertions that have been made about Al-Qaeda, including its involvement in the global trade of West African blood diamonds. Then the discussion focuses on why scholars and policymakers have indicated that sub-Saharan Africa could provide enabling conditions and a hospitable environment for Al-Qaeda to exploit, even though they have not yet done so. And finally, the article looks at key challenges faced by Al-Qaeda in its efforts to gain influence in sub-Saharan Africa, and suggests ways in which the U.S. could exacerbate those challenges in support of US national security objectives.

### **Al-Qaeda's Presence in Africa: What do we know?**

To begin with, Al-Qaeda's known presence on the continent has been primarily within the countries of North and East Africa. The North African role in the story of global jihad is closely linked to the founding of Al-Qaeda. In 1989, when Soviet troops left Afghanistan, scores of North Africans returned to their home countries, feeling proud of their role fighting alongside the Afghan mujahideen in what they felt was a successful jihad against an infidel superpower that had invaded a Muslim country. They returned to Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya and Egypt, where many joined local radical Islamist groups. The largest number of these returning North African fighters were Algerians. Upon returning to their home country they found a growing Islamist movement that offered a natural home for the sentiments of these self-described holy warriors.

In December 1991, the Islamic Salvation Front—the largest Islamic political opposition party—appeared victorious in the first round of Algeria's legislative elections. The military government responded by voiding the election results, triggering the formation of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), an organization which naturally attracted these Al-Qaeda-trained veterans of the Afghan war. Meanwhile, back in Afghanistan, a prominent veteran of the conflict named Abdul Azzam had begun establishing training camps in Afghanistan to support the development of an international cadre of *mujahideen* that could help him liberate his home (the Palestinian Territories) from Israeli occupation. He was assisted in this endeavor by a wealthy young Saudi

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named Osama bin Laden, with whom Azzam has founded Al-Qaeda (the Base) in 1988. Some GIA members traveled to Afghanistan to participate in advanced guerilla warfare training and for other, related reasons, forging long-lasting relationships with other members of the burgeoning jihadist network. [5]

Between 1992 and 1998 the GIA conducted a violent campaign of civilian massacres, sometimes wiping out entire villages in its area of operation. These increasingly violent attacks against civilians spawned a splinter group in 1998, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (*Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*, or GSPC). Several of the GSPC leaders were former GIA members who had received Al-Qaeda training,; they brought innovative tactics and global connections to this bitter struggle against the government. In 2003, for example, the GSPC took 32 European tourists hostage and held them for several months until the German government reportedly paid a ransom of five million Euros. [6] After releasing the hostages, the leader of the GSPC cell—a former Algerian paratrooper named Amari Saifi (whose *nom de guerre* is “El Para”)—led his band of fighters on a running gun battle that began in Mali, transited Niger, and ended in Chad (where he was apprehended with assistance from the U.S.).

Other GSPC cells have trained *mujahideen* to fight in Iraq, and escorted Al-Qaeda emissaries into North Africa with the intention of unifying the various local terrorist groups under the umbrella of Al-Qaeda. [7] In 2004, the Moroccan security services disrupted an Al-Qaeda-supported plot to attack American and European ships passing through the Strait of Gibraltar. In that same year GSPC openly declared its allegiance to Al-Qaeda [8] and its cells have since been discovered in Italy, France, Spain, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany, and Canada. Other North African groups such as the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and the Moroccan Islamic Combat Group also have connections to Al-Qaeda’s global jihad network. More broadly, North Africans have been responsible for attacks in Madrid, Casablanca, Tunis, and Algiers, and have been apprehended as participants in failed terrorist plots in Barcelona, London, Vancouver and Montreal.

In January 2007, the GSPC renamed itself the “Organization of Al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb” (AQIM), and has since been responsible for several violent incidents throughout the region, including the December 2007 car bomb attack against the UN office in Algiers, which killed 17 people; an attack on French contractors in June 2008; the killing of an American aid worker in Mauritania's capital city of Nouakchott in June 2009; the ambush and murder of 11 Algerian soldiers in July 2009; and various kidnappings of foreigners who were being held for ransom. According to North Africa expert Lianne Kennedy-Boudali, “the vast majority of AQIM’s attacks are in the form of ambushes, roadblocks, kidnapping, extortion, and bombings. AQIM has occasionally attacked Algeria’s energy sector, targeting natural gas pipelines with explosive devices or attacking foreign personnel involved with gas production.” [9] From a base of operations in northern Mali, the group has carried out a number

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kidnappings (foreign aid workers and tourists) throughout the border region of Mali, Algeria, Mauritania, and Niger. [10] On March 10, 2010, the group released a video recording of AQIM leader Abu Yusuf entitled “A Speech to the People and Rulers of the Sahel and South of the Desert Countries,” which warned against joining the U.S. and the West in their war against Al-Qaeda. [11] Overall, this group poses a security challenge throughout the North African region, and there are some indications that their influence is spreading to countries southwest of the Saharan Desert as well.

Turning further to the East of Africa, we know that Osama bin Laden and his colleagues lived in Sudan during the early 1990s. [12] According to the 9/11 Commission report, Hassan al Turabi, head of the National Islamic Front—part of a coalition that seized power in Khartoum—invited bin Laden to help him in an ongoing war against African Christian separatists in southern Sudan, carry out road building, and use Sudan as a base for worldwide business operations and for preparations for a global jihad. Bin Laden moved to Sudan in 1991 and set up a large and complex set of intertwined business and terrorist enterprises. In time, these would include numerous companies and a global network of bank accounts and nongovernmental institutions. Fulfilling his bargain with Turabi, Bin Laden used his construction company to build a new highway from Khartoum to Port Sudan on the Red Sea coast. Meanwhile, Al-Qaeda finance officers and top operatives used their positions in bin Laden’s businesses to acquire weapons, explosives, and technical equipment for terrorist purposes. [13]

During this time, bin Laden established an “Islamic Army Shura” that was to serve as the coordinating body for the consortium of terrorist groups with which he was forging alliances. [14] It was comprised of his (personal) Al-Qaeda Shura together with leaders or representatives of terrorist organizations that were still independent. In building this Islamic army, he welcomed groups from throughout the Middle East and Southeast Asia, as well as from the African countries of Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Somalia, Eritrea, Chad, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Uganda. Bin Laden appears to have enjoyed his stay in Sudan until international pressure led by both Western and regional countries (especially following a June 1995 assassination attempt in Ethiopia against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak that was linked to Al-Qaeda) led the Sudanese authorities to “encourage” him to leave. On May 19, 1996, he relocated to Afghanistan under the protection of the Taliban. From there, bin Laden issued his first *fatwa* in August of that year, a declaration of war against the United States. What followed is well known. [15]

In 2006, a group calling itself the “Al-Qaeda Organization in Sudan and Africa,” led by Sheikh Abu Ya’li, claimed responsibility for the September beheadings of the chief editor of the independent Sudanese daily al-Wifaz, and Muhammad Taha, a pro-Islamist who had republished an Internet article that questioned the Prophet Muhammad’s ancestry. [16] And on New Year’s Day 2008, American diplomat John Granville and his Sudanese driver were killed in Khartoum while driving home from a party. A previously unknown group named Ansar al-Tawhid claimed

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responsibility for that attack. [17] Overall, however, Al-Qaeda's influence in Sudan appears to have declined significantly since 2001.

### *East Africa*

For centuries, the Swahili Coast of Africa has had a significant Muslim presence, though rarely demonstrating any radical tendencies. While staying in Sudan, we know that bin Laden sent operatives to Nairobi, Kenya and established an NGO as a cover for them. In 1992, according to the 9/11 Commission Report, Abu Ubayda al-Banshiri (Al-Qaeda's military commander at that time) established the cell in Nairobi, Kenya, [18] which included operatives such as Muhammad Atef (who became Al-Qaeda's military commander after the death of Abu Ubayda al-Banshiri in a May 1996 ferry accident on Lake Victoria), Abdullah Muhammad Abdullah, Muhammad Siddiq Odeh, and Fazul Abdullah Muhammad. [19]

The cell's primary mission was to provide arms and support for Islamic fighters in Somalia, rather than radicalize local community members or plan operations against the relatively pro-Western Kenyan government. [20] However, they were also instructed to identify suitable Western targets in Kenya for potential attacks. According to court records, Ali Muhammad surveilled the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi, the USAID building, the French embassy, the French Cultural Center, and British and Israeli targets. A former Major in the Egyptian Army, Ali Muhammad later became a supply sergeant in the U.S. Army's Special Forces base in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. In 2000, he pled guilty to five counts of conspiracy to kill nationals of the United States and officers or employees of the U.S. government on account of their official duties, to murder and kidnap, and to destroy U.S. property.

In February 1998, bin Laden issued a second *fatwa*, this time calling upon Muslims worldwide to kill Americans and their allies wherever possible. Court records indicate that about this time, the Al-Qaeda plot to attack two U.S. embassies in East Africa was set in motion. Under the leadership of Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, operatives rented safe houses for building the bombs, prepared false documents, and acquired delivery vehicles and explosives. [21] On August 7, 1998, two bomb-laden trucks were driven almost simultaneously into the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, killing 213 people in Nairobi (including 12 Americans) and 11 people in Dar es Salaam, and injuring over 5,000. [22] These attacks, code-named by Al-Qaeda as "Operation Holy Ka'ba" and "Operation al-Aqsa," [23] respectively, were timed to occur between 10:30 and 11:00 AM, when observant Muslims would be in their local mosque for their prayers. [24] Of equal significance, the attacks took place eight years to the day after U.S. troops landed in Saudi Arabia as part of an international effort in response to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. [25]

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Another attack in Kenya, on November 28, 2002, has also been linked to Al-Qaeda. On that day, a suicide bomber drove a truck full of explosives into the lobby of the Paradise Hotel in Kikambala, near Nairobi. Moments later, an Israeli airliner lifting off from the runway at Mombasa's Moi International Airport was fired upon by a shoulder-fired missile launcher that narrowly missed its target. Omar Said Omar, a native of Mombasa, was later arrested and cooperated with authorities in revealing all the names of his co-conspirators and the details of the attack, which included several visits to Somalia for training and planning, and highlighted the ease with which the group acquired weapons, stolen passports and other identification papers, and other logistics support. [26]

Further up the coast of East Africa, Somalia has been one of the most active hotspots of political violence on the continent for decades. Radical Islam has had a presence in Somalia since the early 1980s, predominantly in the form of Al-Ittihad al-Islami (AIAI), a group established through the merger of several Salafi Islamic militant groups in Somalia opposed to the dictatorship of Siad Barre. After the collapse of the Barre regime in the early 1990s, AIAI gathered supporters in part by offering employment and social services, in essence filling a vacuum created by the lack of a functioning government and legitimate economy in Somalia. At the same time, AIAI leader Sheikh Ali Warsame and other members of his group were responsible for a variety of attacks against both government and civilian targets. In December 2001, because of the growing strength of this group and their commitment to violence for bringing about political change, AIAI was added to the U.S. State Department's list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations.

However, despite the considerable Al-Qaeda activities in Sudan, Kenya and Tanzania, Al-Qaeda failed to establish a solid presence in Somalia during the mid-1990s. As recounted by documents captured from its leaders and operatives, Al-Qaeda's efforts to establish a presence in the south of the country and use it as a base for attacks against Western targets elsewhere were largely a failure. [27] As described in the report by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, *Al-Qaeda's (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa*, the jihadists failed to gain traction in Somalia in the early 1990s because: (1) its members were perceived as foreigners; (2) it significantly underestimated the costs of operating in a failed state environment; and (3) its African vanguard did not understand the salience of either local power structures or local Islamic traditions. In a region dominated by clan-based authority structures and moderate Sufi Islam, the benefits of joining a foreign Salafi terrorist organization paled next to the costs of leaving one's clan. [28]

Osama bin Laden and other Al-Qaeda leaders have claimed some involvement in the infamous 1993 "Black Hawk Down" incident in Mogadishu (in which Somali warlord Mohammad Aided's gangs shot down an American military helicopter and subsequently dragged the bodies of dead servicemen through the streets). However, the evidence supporting such claims is limited at best. We do know that in more recent times Al-Qaeda has established a stronger presence in

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Somalia. For example, Kenyan-born Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, a major Al-Qaeda operative of the Kenyan cell described above, was killed in a commando raid in Somalia in September 2009.

In January 2010, the Somali militant group al-Shabaab (“The Youths”) declared its loyalty to Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda. [29] A recent story in the *Wall Street Journal* indicated that al-Shabaab “has taken control of important towns inland and along the coast, including the port towns of Kismayo, and Marka. The group has also reportedly entered into financial arrangements with pirates operating from port cities under al Shabaab’s control. Al Shabaab’s numbers are steadily rising; it’s estimated that they now have up to 7,000 fighters.” [30] Perhaps most worrisome, a recent FBI investigation revealed that a group of Minneapolis teenagers, descendants of Somali immigrants, had traveled to Somalia to join al-Shabaab. According to Senator Joe Lieberman, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, one of these young men— Shirwac Ahmed—was “probably the first US citizen to carry out a terrorist suicide bombing.” [31] Clearly, if this indicates a growing Al-Qaeda influence among African diaspora communities in the West, it is cause for considerable alarm.

#### *West, Central and Southern Africa*

Compared with North and East Africa, Al-Qaeda’s presence or influence throughout the rest of this vast continent is sparse. To be sure, there are pockets of Islamist radicalism that worry security analysts, but these are rare and exceptional cases, with minimal known ties to the global Al-Qaeda network. For example, in Northern Nigeria, the Boko Haram movement (a Hausa term that loosely translates as “Western civilization is forbidden”) preaches the superiority of Muslim culture and seeks the imposition of strict Islamic law. Members of Boko Haram have attacked Nigerian police stations, killed hundreds, burned buildings and battled security forces across five Nigerian states. In 2004, several attacks against police stations in Yobe state yielded the group a considerable stash of arms and ammunitions, allowing the group to build up its own arsenal. The group established training facilities and recruited primarily young men, unemployed and angry at the government’s ineffectiveness and corruption. In August 2009, the group made headlines after they attacked police stations and churches near the town of Maiduguri, the capitol of Borno state, setting off a wave of violence and deaths. Public attention focused on the group and its grievances, as well as the brutal way in which the local police responded to the uprising, including the alleged extra-judicial killing of the group’s original leader Mohammed Yusuf and other members.[32]

In May 2010, the leader of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb offered to assist Boko Haram with weapons and training, and in October of that year a senior leader of Boko Haram reportedly responded by pledging the group’s allegiance to Al-Qaeda.[33] However, in the year since then,

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no evidence has emerged of any formal links between Al-Qaeda and Boko Haram. In 2011, an increasing flurry of attacks led thousands of people to flee Maiduguri for other parts of the country. On June 11, Boko Haram took credit for a suicide bomb attack against the police headquarters in Abuja which killed two people. Four days later, ten Boko Haram members staged simultaneous bomb and gun attacks on a police station and a bank in Katsina state (which is to the west of Borno state), killing seven people. On June 26, the group killed 25 people in an attack on a beer garden in Maiduguri. And on July 24, a bomb exploded in Maiduguri, injuring three soldiers and destroying a military patrol vehicle. [34]

According to the group's current leader, Mallam Sanni Umaru, the group is active in 32 Nigerian states, and is planning to expand activities in vital economic centers like Lagos and Port Harcourt in the Niger Delta. [35] Of course, this oil-rich area of the country already has a significant problem with violent militants, but these are mostly local tribal militias (like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta) whose focus is on the distribution of oil wealth and government services, with no connections to Al-Qaeda's ideology of global jihad. Overall, the December 2009 case of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab (dubbed by some in the media as the "underwear bomber") is perhaps most striking as an exception to the norm, rather than an indicator of a potential growing Al-Qaeda influence in Nigeria.

Elsewhere in West Africa, members of AQIM were caught in an undercover drug operation in Ghana in December 2009. The three suspects, originally from Mali, were arrested in Accra after trying to arrange major shipments of cocaine through the Sahara desert and into Spain. Court documents indicate that agents of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency infiltrated the AQIM cell by posing as Colombians. [36]

Further south, instances of an Al-Qaeda threat in sub-Saharan Africa are even more scarce. In July 2005, a suspected British Al-Qaeda operative named Haroon Rashid Aswat was apprehended in Zambia. But overall, to date we have not seen evidence of any significant organized Al-Qaeda presence in any of southern African countries, with the minor exception of South Africa. In July 2004, fears were raised about potential terrorist attacks in South Africa when individuals allegedly linked to Al-Qaeda were apprehended with detailed maps of Johannesburg, Pretoria, Cape Town and Durban. As Andrew Holt observed, there is already a religious extremist group in South Africa designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the U.S. State Department: the People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD), a group which describes itself as "a militia devoted to safeguarding the interests of ordinary South African Muslims from the scourge of organized crime," though it also routinely espouses anti-Western rhetoric and is an ardent critic of U.S. foreign policy. [37] PAGAD has already been connected to several high-profile attacks in Cape Town, including the Planet Hollywood bombing in 1998 and a series of urban bombings in 2000. [38] However, to date there has been no evidence to suggest that PAGAD is linked in any way to Al-Qaeda.

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In January 2007, the U.S. Treasury named two South African cousins—Junaid Dockrat and Farhad Dockrat—as Specially Designated Global Terrorists because of their support to Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Farhad, who had been detained in the Gambia for suspected terrorist activity in 2005, was identified as having provided nearly \$63,000 to al-Akhtar Trust, a charity that in 2003 was accused of providing support to Al-Qaeda. Junaid was responsible for raising \$120,000 for Hazma Rabia, the Al-Qaeda operations chief killed in Pakistan by the U.S. military in 2005. [39] But Al-Qaeda has yet to show any significant penetration of South Africa.

### *Summary*

Overall, Al-Qaeda's known presence in Africa has been strongest in a handful of Northern and Eastern countries, and weakest in the West, Central and Southern regions of the continent. Even in the case of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the real operational planning and final preparations were conducted by Yemenis, not by anyone in Africa. Beyond what is known for certain about the sub-Saharan Africa-related activities of Al-Qaeda, there are also a number of information sources where one can find assertions and anecdotal indicators of a broader and deeper Al-Qaeda threat to the subcontinent. Yet much of this focuses on how local conditions could create an environment in which Al-Qaeda's ideology finds resonance.

### *The Centrality of Ideological Resonance*

What does the term ideological resonance mean? To begin with, recall the old maxim that all politics is local, even political violence. Therefore, a terrorist group's ideology must have local resonance, in order to convince members of a local population to donate their blood and treasure to the cause. The ideology needs to be communicated effectively and persuasively within a favorable cultural, socio-economic, and political environment which can provide ideological resonance. It is the way in which people react to their environment that enables acts of violence. Thus, many counterterrorism analysts have described various pre-existing conditions which could enable a potentially violent ideology to resonate among a particular population.

Within any given political environment, members of a society have expectations, demands, aspirations and grievances. The degree to which there are opportunities and power to address these without the use of violence is a major determinant of terrorist group formation. Local chaos (for example, in a weak or failing state) can also create an opportunity for an ideology of catastrophic terrorism to resonate. Unemployment, significant ethnic fissures and animosities, socio-demographic pressures (for example, the rising youth bulge in Arab world), and political regimes that are viewed as overly repressive, authoritarian, corrupt and incompetent all contribute to an environment in which a violent ideology can appeal to a broad audience.

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Among Arab Muslims in particular, there is a growing sense of crisis and resentment toward their state leaders and Western allies, along with a sense of powerlessness and humiliation that stems from the relative socio-political standing of the Muslim world versus the Western, Judeo-Christian world; the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (and current U.S. policy towards it), along with Israel's repeated defeat of Arab armies; and a fear that a creeping globalization or westernization of cultural values is having a detrimental impact on long-held traditions and belief structures in the Muslim world.

Many of these environmental enablers are certainly found throughout the Middle East, but can also be seen in other parts of the world. In Southeast Asia, for example, a host of social and economic inequalities have contributed to the rise of Muslim-led secessionist movements since the 1970s, particularly among the Muslim minorities of the southern Philippines and southern Thailand. In Europe, Muslim communities contain many comparatively poor, disenfranchised permanent residents, with limited prospects for successful integration (as opposed to, say, the more integrated Muslim experience in the United States). In major cities like Copenhagen, London and Paris, large numbers of Muslims live in so-called "ethnic enclaves," neighborhoods with impoverished schools, limited transportation and few employment opportunities. These and other environmental factors could be perceived as enablers of ideological resonance, and are cause for concern when analyzing the global spread of the Salafi-Jihadi ideology.

From this perspective, it is easier to see why some scholars and policymakers have suggested that with hundreds of millions of impoverished Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa, surely there is the potential for Al-Qaeda's ideology to find resonance among at least some of them. For example, Ray Wasler of the Heritage Foundation recently opined, "Africa's alienated and restless youth constitute a potentially fertile ground for Al-Qaeda operatives as they seek new ways and fresh recruits to wage jihad against the U.S." [40] It echoes the quote provided in the first paragraph of this article, that "Africa is an emerging haven for our enemies in the Global War on Terrorism," a statement by Rear Admiral Hamlin B. Tallent, the Director of the European Plans and Operations Center for the United States European Command in his March 2005 testimony before the House International Relations Committee Subcommittee. [41]

Some observers have pointed to the twelve northern provinces of Nigeria that adopted Sharia law in 1990 as indicators of rising Islamist extremism. Here, they cite as evidence the involvement of Muslim gangs in the recent flare-ups of sectarian violence in this region (particularly in the towns of Jos and Kano), as well as the various incarnations of the so-called Nigerian Taliban (2002-2003; 2006-2009), known for attacking police stations and other government facilities. As described earlier, the Boko Haram movement has thrived in this politically-volatile environment, and some analysts have suggested that this could also be a hospitable environment for Al-Qaeda's ideology.

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In East Africa, as Angel Rabasa observed, there are “numerous indigenous radical Islamist groups with varying degrees of affinity for Al-Qaeda’s agenda. In addition, missionary groups—many funded by Saudi charities—are actively propagating a radical, fundamentalist, Salafi interpretation of Islam.” [42] Examples include the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement, based in Sudan, which seeks to overthrow the government and establish an Islamic state in Eritrea; the al-Shabaab movement in Somalia (which includes remnants of the former Islamist militant groups like the Islamic Courts Union and AIAI); and the Sudanese branch of Takfir wal-Hijra, a secretive militant group that originated in Egypt, whose ideology espouses the need for isolation from a corrupt society and for excommunicating (and even eliminating) Muslims who fail to follow their conception of the ‘righteous path’. Overall, notes Rabasa, “Geographic proximity and social, cultural, and religious affinities between East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula make East Africa susceptible to infiltration by radical activists and ideologies from the Middle East.” [43]

Internally, throughout sub-Saharan Africa, corruption and oppression have delegitimized many governments in the eyes of their citizens, leading them to preserve their loyalties for alternative power centers like clans, tribes and other ethnic groups instead of supporting a legitimate central government. Countries throughout the subcontinent face enormous challenges with economic and political stability, social justice, and significant resource limitations, and there are several failed or failing states (like Somalia or Zimbabwe) and oppressive dictatorships (like Equatorial Guinea).

In some cases, government forces have done more damage than good when confronting a disenfranchised group. For example, on July 30, 2009, the leader of the Boko Haram movement, Malam Mohammed Yusuf, was killed after he was captured by the Nigerian Army and turned over to the local police in Maidiguri. Video footage obtained and shown by the Arabic satellite television network al-Jazeera revealed that Mohammad Yusuf and dozens of his followers were executed in public by policemen, in some cases while handcuffed. However, to the credit of Nigeria’s criminal justice system, on March 1, 2010, seventeen Nigerian policemen were arrested for these extrajudicial killings. But naturally, there are concerns that the same kind of disaffection and hostility that drive locals to groups like Boko Haram could also be funneled toward the kinds of political violence espoused by Al-Qaeda.

In short, there are a variety of observers who suggest that there is a growing potential for Al-Qaeda to establish a significant level of influence and presence in sub-Saharan Africa. If true, this is certainly cause for concern, particularly since most governments in the subcontinent are limited in their capabilities to confront such a threat without considerable assistance from powerful Western allies. Certainly, among many disenfranchised or marginalized populations in Africa there is a longing for retribution against others for perceived injustices, and a desire to address a power imbalance. Al-Qaeda’s propagandists can tap into these sentiments by offering a

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promise to empower the disenfranchised, and to right a perceived global wrong. Further, Jihadists can also point to various environmental factors which, they argue, support their choice for violence and terrorism.

However, to truly appreciate the nature and scope of this alleged threat, we must balance these perspectives with a recognition of the challenges that Al-Qaeda faces in its efforts to gain influence in Africa. In doing so, we find a variety of very real and significant constraints that this extremist network faces—challenges which could inform a more expansive and robust effort to counter its efforts to gain influence in the sub-continent. Indeed, when looking at sub-Saharan Africa, there are relatively few indications of a hospitable environment in which Al-Qaeda's ideology can find resonance. Unlike the Middle East or Central Asia, there is no history of radical Salafi Islamism in sub-Saharan Africa. In several instances, the strength of moderate Sufi Islamic traditions have provided a bulwark to the attempts by Wahhabi or Salafi preachers to gain influence on the sub-continent.

Repeated polls by organizations such as Zogby and the Pew Research Center reveal that relatively few Muslims in Africa really care about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In addition, the harsh environment creates such basic challenges for human survival that many locals just want to be left alone by Westerners and by Muslim extremists alike. They tend to be more concerned about their daily struggle for human security so that the call for global jihad against the West does not seem to find much support. Further, in some cases where Al-Qaeda has established a presence, locals have been increasingly turning against them, as seen in the growing rebellion against al-Shabaab by Somalis in Mogadishu, described by Jeffrey Gettleman in a March 2010 *New York Times* article. [44]

Perhaps more importantly, Al-Qaeda's ideology has not found support among many critical African sources of influence. That is, the leaders of local clans, tribal and other kinds of ethnic groups—individuals who arguably matter most to Africans—do not find global jihad appealing, and many view Al-Qaeda as an entity that must be resisted. Further, tribal and ethnic rivalries are seen as far more important concerns for these leaders—again, all politics is local. Several local Islamic leaders have worked together in recent years to confront the threat of Al-Qaeda gaining influence in the region. [45] In general, there is no history of radical Islam in sub-Saharan Africa, only various forms of moderate, Sufi Islamic traditions. At a more macro level, organized religion in sub-Saharan Africa is not nearly as pervasive as it is in other parts of the world; there are a plethora of traditional Animist and other indigenous forms of religion that are viewed as more favorable by locals.

Another reason for the limited resonance of Al-Qaeda's message is that its declaration of war against the U.S. has not been well-received by many in Africa. To most Africans, the U.S. is not considered an enemy, and there is far less animosity towards the U.S. than towards the former

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Western European countries who colonized the African continent. In contrast, the U.S. is known as having done quite a lot for Africans, particular from its position as the world's largest provider of humanitarian and security assistance. Facts like these undermine the legitimacy of Al-Qaeda's ideology, and without legitimacy there can be no resonance, and thus the likelihood of someone taking action on the basis of that ideology is greatly diminished.

### *Three Core Challenges Al-Qaeda Faces in Sub-Saharan Africa*

Among the many other challenges faced by Al-Qaeda in sub-Saharan Africa, three appear to stand out in the view of this author: 1) the group's means of communicating and influencing target audiences in the region are limited; 2) the U.S. and its allies have actively sought to confront the Al-Qaeda threat in Africa, and these initiatives have had modest success, while indigenous local and regional efforts are also having a similarly productive impact; and 3) there are important differences of opinion among Al-Qaeda's leadership over the rationale and justification for investing the organization's limited resources in sub-Saharan Africa.

#### *Limited Means of Communications and Influence*

Al-Qaeda's main conduit for communicating with the broader world is the Internet. In March 2008, the Associated Press noted that "the terror network is recruiting computer-savvy technicians to produce sophisticated web documentaries and multimedia products aimed at Muslim audiences in the United States, Britain and other western countries." [46] Clearly, the Internet plays an increasingly central role in their struggle for influence over hearts and minds in the Muslim World. According to Steve Coll and Susan Glasser, "Al-Qaeda has become the first guerrilla movement in history to migrate from physical space to cyberspace. With laptops and DVDs, in secret hideouts and at neighborhood Internet cafes, young code-writing jihadists have sought to replicate the training, communication, planning and preaching facilities they lost in Afghanistan with countless new locations on the Internet." [47] Their uses of the Internet include mobilization and radicalization, training, support (fundraising and friend-raising), financial transactions, logistics arrangements, surveillance, cell-related operational communications, and much more. [48] Thousands of websites in all parts of the world reflect a growing virtual community of individuals linked indirectly through association of belief, who celebrate Al-Qaeda and its ideas. [49]

Al-Qaeda effectively employs models of viral marketing to advance its strategic influence campaigns, using Internet vehicles like YouTube, blogs, websites and so forth to exploit the portrayal of kinetic events, especially spectacular attacks and martyrdom operations. In essence, decentralized global information networks are playing an increasingly prominent role in modern

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terrorist organizations' ability to communicate with various target audiences. The mass media function of the Internet allows anyone to become a powerful communicator, providing an open forum for the exchange of words, sounds, and images which can influence thinking and behavior. Further, when many voices communicate the same message, in ways that complement and reinforce this message, the result is a more powerful and pervasive form of influence.

However, sub-Saharan Africa is largely offline. Satellite photos of our planet illustrate why Africa is often referred to as the “dark continent”—compared with other parts of the world, there are virtually no lights on at night, with the exception of South Africa, Egypt, Morocco, parts of Nigeria, and a few major cities in Kenya and Tanzania. The absence of lights, in turn, reflects the very limited access to electricity (and other types of infrastructure and government services) that most Africans deal with on a daily basis. In this context, access to the Internet is quite limited, and mostly concentrated around major urban areas. In the U.S., it is increasingly common to find widespread Internet access from home, through DSL, cable or satellite. In comparison, only some Africans may have a little exposure to the Internet—via a local university or Internet café—while most have none at all. Granted, this is changing via the rapid expansion of basic mobile services and a growing market for smartphone users that provide Internet access. But to date the Internet has not been a significant means for Al-Qaeda to connect with disenfranchised Africans in the same manner that we have seen Western Europeans or Americans radicalized by videos and websites promoting the Salafi-Jihadist ideology.

Related to this is Al-Qaeda's need for media and publicity to generate the kind of images and perceptions that favor their cause. Since fewer cameras are focused on sub-Saharan Africa than on other parts of the world, a group that is so heavily focused on managing perception is far more likely to carry out attacks in places that will guarantee fast, global coverage. Perhaps this is one of many reasons why Europe is considered by most terrorism scholars as a much more likely target of Al-Qaeda influence and attacks than sub-Saharan Africa.

#### *The Growing Impact of Efforts to Counter Al-Qaeda's Influence*

Many of sub-Saharan Africa's states have shown a strong commitment to resisting Al-Qaeda's efforts to gain influence and support in the region. For example, the Sudanese government significantly increased its counterterrorism cooperation with the U.S. after the attacks of 9/11. As Angel Rabasa notes, “Khartoum is now closely aligned with the United States in the campaign against international terrorism . . . Sudanese security forces have deported suspected foreign terrorists to their countries of origin and reportedly handed to the United States files with photographs of most of the Al-Qaeda and Egyptian Islamic Jihad leaders previously based in Khartoum.” [50] In fact, the level of cooperation between the two countries provoked an angry rebuke from the prominent Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. [51]

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One of the main U.S. initiatives that seeks to address the potential influence of Al-Qaeda in Africa has been the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP). As Lianne Kennedy-Boudali pointed out, “The goal of the TSCTP is to build partner capacity for counterterrorism and facilitate efforts to counter extremist thought.” [52] Begun in 2005 as the Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI), this interagency program has grown to include nine countries—Morocco, Algeria, Mali, Niger, Tunisia, and Mauritania, Senegal, Nigeria, and Chad. [53] Through a combination of military-to-military security assistance and development programs that aim to reduce support for violent extremism, the TSCTP seeks to address the core factors that could provide an enabling environment for Al-Qaeda’s ideology to resonate.

North African countries participating in this initiative receive counterterrorism training from U.S. Marines and Army Special Forces on such things as basic marksmanship, planning, communications, land navigation, and patrolling. [54] Participating countries have also received equipment such as night vision goggles and specially-equipped sports utility vehicles. A program in Nigeria teaches non-violent conflict resolution and provides social engagement for at-risk youth through basketball leagues. Other programs range from capacity-building seminars for local militaries to the promotion of moderate authors and textbooks for local schools. In addition, regional conferences have been sponsored for defense ministers and military intelligence chiefs, bringing them together in order to build trust and demonstrate the advantages of cooperation. [55]

Overall, various government efforts throughout sub-Saharan Africa—some sponsored or even led by the U.S.—are having a positive impact on diminishing the potential for Al-Qaeda’s ideology to find resonance. Not only are various governments working toward this end, but in March 2009 a group of traditional Islamic leaders from across West Africa met to “try and form a common front against Al-Qaeda’s growing influence in the region.” [56] These efforts demonstrate a recognition *at the local level* of the threat posed by Al-Qaeda and its affiliate networks. In the end, only Africans can insulate their communities from Al-Qaeda’s influence and radicalization efforts.

#### *Internal Organizational Perceptions of Limited Strategic Benefits*

Finally, there are important differences of opinion among Al-Qaeda’s leadership over the rationale and justification for investing the organization’s limited resources in sub-Saharan Africa. As evidenced by documents captured in Al-Qaeda safe houses and laptops in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, there is a significant debate within the organization about the perceived benefits—or lack thereof—that could be derived from investing limited resources in trying to achieve greater influence in sub-Saharan Africa.

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In fact, Al-Qaeda is starved for cash. This has been made abundantly clear by their constant (and sometimes urgent) appeals from Al-Qaeda leaders and spokesmen for funding from the global *ummah* (Muslim community). To date, INTERPOL and the U.S. Department of Treasury (among other major agencies of this type) have found scant evidence that Africans are responding to these pleas for financial assistance. Further, as members of the world's poorest continent (by far), many Africans struggle mightily to achieve even the bare minimal quality of life. Thus, sub-Saharan Africa offers relatively limited prospects for productive fundraising by global jihadists. Instead, Al-Qaeda's interests in Africa are more likely to be geared toward trafficking in drugs or weapons and other profit-making ventures. Establishing training camps or mobilizing populations might be of interest, but as described above, a thorough scan of the African environment does not yield much evidence that Al-Qaeda would have success in pursuing such a course of action at this time.

At best, sub-Saharan Africa offers an environment for an array of organized crime activities. Trafficking in drugs, weapons, human beings, and counterfeit goods is already a vibrant activity in the subcontinent, and particularly in West Africa. This criminal environment that could facilitate some Al-Qaeda operations, particularly fundraising and money-making schemes. However, it could just as easily prove inhospitable for Al-Qaeda and its network of affiliates.

### ***Conclusion and Implications***

In sum, sub-Saharan Africa should not be considered a key front in the war between Al-Qaeda and the Western world. Nor, however, should it be ignored altogether. Al-Qaeda's internal documents indicate that they find other parts of the world more hospitable, having more to offer by way of logistical support and potential targets of opportunity. There are few, if any, valid indications that Al-Qaeda is gaining (or losing) ground in Sub-Saharan Africa. Further, it would appear that, judging from its own statements in documents and web forum postings, relatively few members of Al-Qaeda see much value in focusing increasing attention to growing its influence in Africa. That said, it is important that the U.S. and its allies continue to work to ensure that Al-Qaeda does not gain a significant foothold in sub-Saharan Africa. To do so we must engage not only states but incorporate important local non-state actors in our efforts as well.

This analysis generates a variety of potential research questions, such as

- "What is the likelihood of North African Jihadist groups (like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the Moroccan Islamic Liberation Front, and al-Shabaab in Somalia) spreading their influence south of the Pan-Sahel region?"
  - "Under what conditions would this likelihood increase?" and
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- “What role, if any, can the international community play in exacerbating the challenges that Al-Qaeda already faces in its efforts to gain influence in sub-Saharan Africa?”

Research on these and many other related kinds of questions is urgently needed. Future security policies and strategies should be informed by a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of Al-Qaeda’s influence—or rather, lack thereof—in sub-Saharan Africa.

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## Notes

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- [2] Kurt Shillinger, “Al-Qaeda in Southern Africa,” *Armed Forces Journal*, February 2006. Online at: <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2006/02/1813653/> (accessed June 15, 2011).
- [3] Ibid.
- [4] See a BBC profile on Abdulmutallab (published January 7, 2010) at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8431530.stm>
- [5] For a personal account of these training camps and the GIA, please see Omar Nasiri, *Inside the Jihad* (New York: Basic Books, 2006). Also, for more on Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda, see Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower* (New York: Knopf, 2006), Peter Bergen, *Holy War, Inc.* (New York: Free Press, 2002), and Jason Burke, *Al-Qaida* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2004).
- [6] Material in these two paragraphs were previously published in Lianne Kennedy Boudali, “The Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative: America’s New Commitment to Africa,” in *Countering Terrorism and Insurgency in the 21st Century*, edited by James J.F. Forest (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007).
- [7] Stephen Ulph, “Al Qaida Networks Uncovered in Morocco,” *Terrorism Focus*, Vol. 2, No. 23 (December 13, 2005)
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- [10] Scott Baldauf, “Al Qaida Rises in West Africa,” *Christian Science Monitor* (December 27, 2009). Online at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2009/1228/Al-Qaida-rises-in-West-Africa>
- [11] Murad Batal al-Shishani, “Salafi-Jihadis in Mauritania at the Center of Al-Qaeda’s Strategy,” *Terrorism Monitor*, vol 8, No. 12 (March 26, 2010).
- [12] This paragraph summarizes *The 9/11 Commission Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2004), p. 57.
- [13] *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 57.
- [14] *The 9/11 Commission Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2004) p. 58.
- [15] Ibid.
- [16] See Angel Rabasa, “Radical Islam in East Africa” (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009), p. 5.
- [17] “Sudanese Extremist Group Claims Killing of US Diplomat,” *Sudan Tribune*, May 5, 2008. Cited in Angel Rabasa, p. 53.
- [18] *9/11 Commission Report*, p. 65.
- [19] *USA v Osama bin Laden*, Summation of Prosecutor, pp. 5253-5261; For names of the operatives see the declassified FBI Executive Summary of FBI’s investigation into the embassy bombings. The document can be found at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/binladen/bombings/summary.html> (Accessed on June 4, 2011). Note that in June 2011, Fazul Abdullah Mohammed was reported killed in Somalia, though an investigation to confirm this is still ongoing.
- [20] *The 9/11 Commission Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2004) p. 58.
- [21] *9/11 Commission Report*, p. 69.
- [22] In Kenya, the number of casualties would have been significantly higher if not for the guards who refused to allow the truck inside the compound. In Tanzania, due to good fortune, a water tanker stood between the bomb-carrying truck and the embassy building and absorbed a lot of the bomb’s impact. For more on this attack and the events that followed, please see Sundara Vadlamudi, “The U.S. Embassy Bombings in Kenya and Tanzania,” in *Countering Terrorism and Insurgency in the 21st Century*, edited by James J.F. Forest (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007).
- [23] Prosecution’s closing argument presented by Kenneth Karas, *United States of America v. Usama Bin Laden et al.*, [henceforth *USA v Usama bin Laden et al.*] United States District Court, Southern District of New York, s(7) 98 cr. 1023, May 1, 2001, p. 5376. In February 1998, while issuing the *fatwa* against the Americans and announcing the formation of the World Islamic Front Against Jews and Crusaders, bin Laden stated : [I]t is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it to kill Americans and their allies—civilian and military—in any country where it is

- possible to do so, in order to liberate the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Holy Mosque [the Al-Haram Mosque in Mecca, home of the Kaba] from their grip..." See Randall B. Hamud, ed., *Osama Bin Laden: America's Enemy In His Own Words* (San Diego, CA: Nadeem, 2005), p. 60.
- [24] Peter Bergen, *Holy War Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), p. 108.
- [25] For more on this attack and the events that followed, see Sundara Vadlamudi, "The U.S. Embassy Bombings in Kenya and Tanzania," in *Countering Terrorism and Insurgency in the 21st Century*, edited by James J.F. Forest (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007).
- [26] The (Disallowed) Confession of Omar Said Omar,—a document that was made available to journalists (who sought it from the Court Clerk) after it was submitted, but before the judge had ruled on its admissibility—is available as Appendix CIII of the CTC report, "Al Qaida's Misadventures in the Horn of Africa" (beginning on p. 155), available online at <http://ctc.usma.edu>
- [27] See "Al Qaida's Misadventures in the Horn of Africa," a report published by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, which includes the original and translated versions of these documents. Online at: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/aq>
- [28] Combating Terrorism Center, "Al Qaida's Mis-Adventures in the Horn of Africa," available online at: <http://ctc.usma.edu/aq>
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- [30] Ali Soufan, "Somali Extremists Have Al-Qaeda Ties," *Wall Street Journal*, April 15, 2009. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123976236664319677.html>.
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- [32] Stephanie Schwartz, "Is Nigeria a Hotbed of Islamic Extremism?" USIP Peace Brief 27 (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, May 4, 2010)
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- [41] Rear Admiral Hamlin B. Tallent, USN, Director, European Plans and Operations Center United States European Command in testimony before the House International Relations Committee Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Non-Proliferation, 10 March 2005.
- [42] Angel Rabasa, *Radical Islam in East Africa* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009), p. xi.
- [43] Ibid.
- [44] Jeffrey Gettleman, "Somali Backlash May be Militants' Worst Foe," *New York Times* (March 23, 2010).
- [45] Amil Khan, "Al Qaida's spreading tentacles in West Africa opposed by traditional leaders," *Daily Telegraph (UK)*, (28 March 2009). Online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/mali/5067404/Al-Qaidas-spreading-tentacles-in-West-Africa-opposed-by-traditional-leaders.html>
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