



Somalia May Fall Into Al-Qaeda's Hands

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In two recent audio statements, Osama bin Laden named Sudan's Darfur region and Somalia as al-Qaeda's new fronts in Africa.

He urged jihadists in these areas to target all peacekeepers. In his statements, bin Laden not only suggested that al-Qaeda has taken an increased interest in East Africa, but also praised the Islamic Courts' victories in Somalia. Bin Laden identified Sudan as a natural focus for the spread of jihadist activity from Arabia into Africa. He had good reason to welcome the victories of the Islamic Courts, because they could make Somalia al-Qaeda's main route into Africa.

Bin Laden's use of Africa as a key part of his global jihad is not new. He lived in Sudan in the early 1990s, building his militia network until the government in Khartoum, responding to international pressure, expelled him. Now, in the wake of political violence in Somalia and Sudan, bin Laden's interest in Africa is peaking again. Recently, an article in Sada al-Jihad (Echo of Jihad), a virtual magazine published by supporters of global Jihad, very clearly sketched the new direction of al-Qaeda's global jihad: toward Africa. The article, in Arabic, titled "Al-Qaeda is moving to Africa", provides an analysis of all the possible advantages of Africa as a battlefield and greenhouse for global Jihad.

Recent developments in Somalia give even more support to al-Qaeda's growing focus on Africa. The Islamist radicals who call themselves the Supreme Council of Islamic Courts of Somalia have captured Mogadishu and much of the city's surrounding territory. If they can defeat the official government in Baidoa, only some 240 kilometres from Mogadishu, they will seize a strategically vital arc of territory bordering both Kenya and Ethiopia. They will also have seized control of numerous ports and airstrips scattered across southern Somalia. The danger is that those ports and airstrips will become conduits for arms and supplies for Islamist terrorism all over Africa, if not worldwide.

One of the reasons bin Laden sees Somalia as a staging ground for his global Jihad is his link to Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, the leader of the Supreme Council. Although Aweys denies that link, it goes back for years. In 2001, the United Nations named Aweys as an associate of bin Laden and asked member nations to freeze his assets. A former colonel, Aweys has been involved with the terrorist group al-Ittihad al-Islamiya since its inception in the 1990s. Since 1993, it has actively worked with al-Qaeda to carry out acts of aggression. Among those acts, al-Ittihad provided support to al-Qaeda in the 1998 bombings of the US Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. Soon after those attacks, bin Laden reportedly visited a joint al-Ittihad/al-Qaeda camp at Ras Kamboni in southern Somalia to congratulate those who had provided material support for the al-Qaeda operations. In 2002, al-Ittihad reportedly also provided support to the al-Qaeda operatives who bombed the Paradise Hotel in Mombasa and tried to shoot down an Israeli airliner.

A strategic objective of al-Ittihad is the establishment of a pan-Somali Caliphate in the Horn of Africa that also encompassed portions of Ethiopia, Djibouti and Kenya. To accomplish that objective, al-Ittihad launched a terror campaign and a military invasion of Ethiopia in the mid-1990s. The invasion failed but as the fighting progressed, bin Laden transported several hundred Arab mujahidin to Somalia to assist al-Ittihad. Aweys was one of al-Ittihad's senior military commanders.

Al-Qaeda is still in Somalia. A March 2005 UN report described Somalia as a harbour for a large force of jihadist fighters supported by no less than 17 terrorist training camps.

There are reports that senior bin Laden lieutenants have visited the country to survey al-Qaeda's progress in Africa and the needs of its Somali allies.

As for bin Laden's interest in Sudan, a recent international intelligence document cites credible reports of a cadre of about 15 al-Qaeda operatives living in Sudan and providing training to Janjaweed fighters. This fits with bin Laden's mention of the Janjaweed in his latest audio tape, released in July, in which he congratulated those Arab fighters. Sudanese officials have seized on bin Laden's statement and others like it to insist that the government's hands are tied in controlling the murderous Janjaweed raiders because they are tied to al-Qaeda, not the government. According to the confidential intelligence report, the foreign al-Qaeda trainers arrived in Sudan from Kenya, Mali, Libya, Somalia, Egypt and possibly Yemen. Indications point to the cadre coming out of Afghanistan and Iraq to join the Janjaweed for training and combat.

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Bin Laden made clear that no love is lost between him and the Bashir regime in Kahartoum, saying the mujahidin should take up arms "in western Sudan, not in defense of the Khartoum government". His support for the Janjaweed is clearly tied to his plan for jihad. And while his eyes are now on Somalia and Sudan, no African nation is safe from his terror.

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