



Africa Spectrum

Krech, Hans (2011),
The Growing Influence of Al-Qaeda on the African Continent,
in: *Africa Spectrum*, 46, 2, 125-137.
ISSN: 1868-6869 (online), ISSN: 0002-0397 (print)

The online version of this and the other articles can be found at:
<www.africa-spectrum.org>

Published by
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of African Affairs
in co-operation with the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation Uppsala and Hamburg
University Press.

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The Growing Influence of Al-Qaeda on the African Continent

Hans Krech

Abstract: Al-Qaeda's influence in Africa is growing. From 2009 to 2011, activity by Al-Qaeda was noted in 19 African nations and regions. Four regional Al-Qaeda organizations operate on the continent, which in turn often have several sub-organizations: the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (with its sub-organizations Al-Qaeda in Mali, Al-Qaeda in Mauritania, Al-Qaeda in Morocco and Al-Qaeda in Sudan) and Al-Shabab in Somalia. Since Osama bin Laden's death on 2 May 2011, the influence of African leaders within Al-Qaeda has increased significantly. All three presumed members of the strategic command level originate from Africa. The revolutions of the Arab Spring have not harmed Al-Qaeda. This contribution highlights the potential for further expansion by Al-Qaeda on the African continent, and how this needs to be responded to.

■ Manuscript received 1 October 2011; accepted 15 October 2011

Keywords: Africa, international terrorism, terrorists/terrorist groups

Hans Krech is the managing director of the Scientific Forum for International Security (Wissenschaftliches Forum für Internationale Sicherheit e.V. – WIFIS) at the German Federal Armed Forces Command and Staff College (Führungsakademie der Bundeswehr), in Hamburg, Germany. Captain (reserve) Krech is the author of numerous security policy studies.

During the last two years, the four regional organizations of Al-Qaeda in Africa have increasingly become the focus of global attention: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) puts security in the whole Sahel and Sahara regions at risk. Al-Shabab officially joined Al-Qaeda in 2010 and are poised to found their own independent state in Somalia. Both Ayman az-Zawahiri, the new number one of Al-Qaeda, and Saif al-Adel, the military leader of Al-Qaeda, are members of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ). The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) played an important role in the recent Libyan revolution. Abu Yahya al-Libi, another Libyan, is part of the strategic leadership of Al-Qaeda, which, after the death of Anwar al-Awlaki – a US citizen of Yemeni origin – on 30 September 2011, now probably consists of three Africans. In 2009, Osama bin Laden appointed the first East African regional leader of Al-Qaeda. Never before have Africans had this much influence on this unique and pioneering global, non-governmental terror organization.

This will most likely also have consequences for Al-Qaeda's influence on the African continent. Currently, there are more than 20,000 people already fighting for Al-Qaeda in Africa, and they are becoming increasingly connected. More and more Al-Qaeda operations occur in sub-Saharan Africa – for example, in Burkina Faso, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Tanzania and Uganda. Boko Haram in Nigeria (Adesoji 2010) may soon become another Al-Qaeda member organization.

The Area of Operations of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: As Large as Europe

AQIM has its roots in the bloody civil war that took place in Algeria during the 1990s. In April 1999, about 700 Salafists seceded from the Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA) and founded the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC). Since July 2004 Abdel-Malek Drudkal has been the emir of the GSPC. In 2006 he pursued intense negotiations with Ayman az-Zawahiri about the group's accession to Al-Qaeda; this is notable because the Egyptian az-Zawahiri ended up becoming Al-Qaeda's new head after Osama bin Laden's death. On 25 January 2007, the GSPC transformed into AQIM and effectively joined Al-Qaeda (Krech 2011a). Drudkal also managed to integrate many more Salafist factions into AQIM. Well-known AQIM sub-organizations are, for instance, Al-Qaeda in Mauritania, Al-Qaeda in Morocco and Al-Qaeda in Sudan.

The area of operations comprises the entire Sahara and Sahel regions: Algeria, Burkina Faso, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Sudan and Tunisia. The area of operations is, therefore, larger than Europe.

Yet, the number of fighters is low. The strength of AQIM is estimated at about 800 fighters, organized into brigades of about 25 fighters each. The areas of operations are numbered and allocated to specific brigades. In spring 2011 AQIM established a Saharan emirate and brigades were re-designated battalions. Several new commanders were also appointed.

AQIM funds itself by taking hostages, both local and foreign. In 2010 they were in fact able to extort 10 million EUR in ransom for hostages from Spain (*Al-Hayat* 2010b). On 15 September 2010, AQIM abducted five French citizens and two Africans near the uranium ore mining site of AREVA in Arlit, Niger. The terror organization demanded the withdrawal of French forces from Afghanistan and a ransom for the release of the hostages (*Al-Hayat* 2010c; *Jane's Intelligence Weekly* 2010b, 2010c). AREVA, a French state-owned enterprise, is a global market leader for nuclear technology. Since 1968, it has produced approximately 100,000 tons of uranium ore in northern Niger, causing heavy environmental damage. Moreover, those Tuareg who have settled in northern Niger receive almost no share of the profits from the uranium ore mining. Thus, at least some Tuareg surely approved of the taking of hostages by AQIM (*Al-Hayat* 2010d).

The principal source of AQIM's funding is, however, the cocaine trade. With its four-wheel-drive jeeps, AQIM transports cocaine from West Africa – where couriers bring it in from Colombia – through the Sahara to Egypt and/or Tunisia. From there, the cocaine is smuggled into the EU. According to a report by the Algerian government, AQIM is assumed to have generated a profit of approximately 50 million EUR from the drug trade from 2007 to 2011 (*Der Spiegel* 2011). At the beginning of August 2011, several AQIM groups in Mali and Niger engaged in a military power struggle over the distribution of the profits made from drug trafficking. Four AQIM fighters died in a gunfight near Sekta Moussa in Mali (*El-Khabar* 2011a). AQIM is, hence, a 50 per cent criminal organization and an integral part of the globally operating cocaine mafia. Numerous fighters from AQIM work almost exclusively for the Columbian drug cartels. Like Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which are closely connected to the heroin mafia, AQIM could, in the long run, continue to exist as part of the drug cartels' networks, even if Al-Qaeda itself falls apart. This reality tremendously hinders the fight against AQIM.

AQIM's military efficiency is limited by a fiercely contested struggle for power within Al-Qaeda's regional organizations. AQIM is split into two wings: Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the leader of Al-Qaeda in Sudan, wants to topple Drudkal and succeed him as emir (*El Watan* 2010).

When the Libyan arsenal was looted, thousands of man-portable air defence systems (MANPADS) – Strela-2 (NATO-code: SA-7a Grail) and

Strela-2M (NATO-code: SA-7b Grail) missiles – disappeared. It was assumed that the Qaddafi regime owned about 20,000 Strela MANPADS produced in Russia. Some of these weapons have fallen into the hands of AQIM. These Strela MANPADS are, however, older models. The manufacturer only guarantees their full usability for ten years. In particular, the batteries have probably expired by now. Moreover, the use of Strela MANPADS in combat requires substantial previous training (Schroeder 2011). In mid-September 2011, the US Secret Service warned all US embassies and oil firms in the Sahara and Sahel regions of possible attacks on civilian airplanes by the AQIM with MANPADS. Planes that are taking off or landing from the oil firms' airports are considered to be particularly at risk. (Military planes normally fly sufficiently high and fast to stay out of range of MANPADS (*El-Khabar* 2011b).) Also in the middle of September, the Libya's Transitional National Council set up an international fact-finding commission to discover the whereabouts of the missing weapons. This commission entrusted the CIA with the investigation of this smuggling of arms. So far, Libyan officers who have been arrested by Libyan rebels have been interrogated by the CIA. Investigations are also planned for Chad, Mali and Niger (*El-Khabar* 2011c).

One other aspect that has thus far been neglected is that since AQIM has followers and supporters in France, Spain and Germany, the risk of AQIM-initiated attacks is also high in the EU. In Paris, the Eiffel Tower was evacuated three times during the second half of 2010 due to the possible threat of an AQIM attack.

Somalia in Danger of Being Taken Over by Al-Shabab

The Somali militia Al-Shabab emerged in 2004 and 2005 in Camp Al-Huda, in the Bakool region. Al-Shabab has members from many different clans, a fact that fundamentally distinguishes them from the wide variety of other Somali militias and parties, most of which are organized on a clan basis.

Al-Shabab was the most important militia in the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), which controlled extensive areas of the country in 2005 and 2006. In the course of the combat operations undertaken against the Ethiopian occupying forces, Al-Shabab developed into the strongest Islamist militia in the country and succeeded, by 2011, in conquering the entire south of Somalia – from the Kenyan border to Mogadishu. Until early August 2011, Al-Shabab also controlled many of Mogadishu's suburbs. In the northern part of Somalia, Al-Shabab's influence is also growing. A militia

from Puntland joined forces with Al-Shabab in 2010, and a raiding patrol from the terror organization soon reached the pirates' territories.

For years, individual leaders in Al-Shabab entertained contacts with Al-Qaeda before officially joining it on 1 February 2010 (Krech 2011c: 4). At that time, Al-Shabab boasted approximately 9,000 fighters. One particularity of Al-Shabab is that its fighters wear uniforms and receive sound military training. The fighters are also comprised of about 1,200 foreigners, including – reportedly – 12 US citizens. Two US citizens have even committed suicide attacks in Somalia (Bergen, Hoffmann and Tiedemann 2011: 66, 73). US citizen Omar Hammami (codename: Abu Mansoor al-Amriki) is one of Al-Shabab's best-known field commanders; he defected to Somalia in 2006.

Al-Shabab seeks close cooperation with the other Al-Qaeda organizations in Africa and on the Arabian Peninsula. Al-Shabab fighters have also been identified in the Sahara, Saudi Arabia and Yemen (*El-Khabar* 2010). Several times Al-Shabab has also tried to commit attacks abroad: In Australia, all four members of a combat team that was in the preparation stages of a Mumbai-style attack¹ against an Australian army barracks were arrested on 4 August 2009. On 3 January 2010, a Somali – inspired by Al-Shabab – attacked Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard with an axe in his apartment, in Viby. On 11 July 2010, Al-Shabab carried out two bomb attacks in Kampala against soccer fans during the World Cup Finals, in which 64 people were killed. Then, on 27 November 2010, a Somali with connections to Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan/Pakistan attempted to carry out a bomb attack at a Christmas-tree lighting ceremony in the US state of Oregon, but failed (Jasparro 2011: 16).

In 2010, Al-Shabab clashed with government forces – backed by the African Union (AU) and NATO – operating under Interim President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, a confrontation that initially ended in a stalemate. Later, however, Hizbul Islam, the second most powerful Islamist militia, joined Al-Shabab, and, accordingly, Al-Qaeda did too, on 20 December 2010 (*Al-Hayat* 2010e). This changed the balance of power in favour of Al-Shabab, who are believed to be poised to attempt to bring Somalia entirely

1 This is an attack by a group of suicide combatants against a metropolis or a complex of buildings without any defined target for the attack. The objective is simply to kill as many people as possible. From 26 to 28 November 2008, the Pakistani terror group Lashkar-e Tayyiba (LeT), which is allied with Al-Qaeda, committed an attack with ten fighters against the Indian metropolis of Mumbai, home to 14 million inhabitants. The terrorists fired at random and ultimately killed 175 people and injuring 300 more. Since then, these tactics have constituted Al-Qaeda's most dangerous type of attack. In the winter of 2010–2011, Al-Qaeda threatened Germany with Mumbai-style attacks in Berlin.

under their control through an offensive in 2011 or 2012. The founding of an “Al-Qaeda nation on the Horn of Africa” is impending. So far only the horribly catastrophic drought has prevented the commencement of the offensive. On the night of 5–6 August 2011, Al-Shabab surprisingly completely withdrew from Mogadishu in order to facilitate the provision of the local population with relief goods (*Welt am Sonntag* 2011). Prior to this, there had been a vehement debate among the leaders of Al-Shabab as to whether Western relief organizations should be allowed to enter the country (Knaup 2011a: 88). Obviously, the more moderate leaders eventually prevailed. However, it is also possible that Al-Shabab withdrew their fighters in order to first completely conquer the areas from north of Mogadishu to Puntland. The Al-Shabab leaders explained their withdrawal from Mogadishu as simply a “change in strategy”. In July 2011 Al-Shabab opened a new front in the Galgala Mountains in Somaliland. Foreign fighters from Yemen and Nigeria constitute part of the terrorist combat group (*Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy* 2011).

In order to increase military pressure on the Al-Shabab leaders, the US began to launch drone attacks in Somalia in late June 2011 (Jaffe and DeYoung 2011). Accordingly, alongside Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan and Yemen, Somalia is now the sixth target country for US drone attacks against Al-Qaeda leaders (Krech 2011d). On 16 October 2011, the Kenyan army started an offensive in southern Somalia with the explicit aim of destroying Al-Shabab (Knaup 2011b), but this will be an arduous task. A severe blow for Al-Shabab was the death of Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, who was killed on 7 June 2011 in a firefight in Mogadishu. Born on the Comoros, he was the most wanted Al-Qaeda leader in sub-Saharan Africa. The US government had put a bounty of 5 million USD on the physician – who was a master of disguise and had 18 fake identities – not least because he was the suspected chief orchestrator of the attacks against the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. In 2009, he was appointed Al-Qaeda’s regional commander for East Africa by Osama bin Laden; at the same time, he was also one of the key military leaders of Al-Shabab (*Süddeutsche Zeitung* 2011a).

The Egyptian Islamic Jihad and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group

The Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) was founded in Egypt in 1980, operating in the Greater Cairo area. The goal of its struggle was to overthrow the Sadat regime. In the 1980s the EIJ was headed by Sayyed Imam al-Sharif (code-name: Dr. Fadl) and, since 1991, it has been led by Ayman az-Zawahiri. The EIJ has lost significant influence since the downfall of the Mubarak regime

in Egypt. Ayman az-Zawahiri addressed the Egyptian people in several appeals during the spring of 2011 (*Al-Quds al-Arabi* 2011), but the demonstrators nonetheless carried no Al-Qaeda posters. This – at least temporary – powerlessness of the EIJ in Egypt is in contrast to its increase in power within Al-Qaeda. On 16 June 2011, the General Command officially declared Ayman az-Zawahiri the new number one, succeeding Osama bin Laden, who was killed by US Navy Seals in Abbottabad, Pakistan, on 2 May 2011. In Ayman az-Zawahiri and Saif al-Adel, the EIJ has provided two of the three presumed members at the strategic command level. The other member is thought to be the Libyan Abu Yahya al-Libi.

Ayman az-Zawahiri's preeminent strength is his talent for organizing, which is why he is characterized as being the mastermind of Al-Qaeda. It was Ayman az-Zawahiri who organized the restructuring of Al-Qaeda that led to it becoming the first global, non-governmental terror organization, beginning in 2006.

The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) was officially founded in October 1995. Yet, the LIFG had already begun to develop clandestinely in 1989 and 1990 as an organization of Libyan–Afghan fighters. The majority of its members came from the tribes in the east of Libya, which were then being oppressed by the Qaddafi regime (Knights 2008: 23).

On 3 November 2007, the LIFG joined Al-Qaeda. However, Noman Benotman, the LIFG's leader-in-exile, eventually broke with Al-Qaeda and travelled from London to Libya 25 times in the first half of 2008 to try and persuade arrested members of his faction to renounce the use of force. The members of this former terror group were asked to sign a non-violence manifesto and to return to civilian life (Sandberg 2008). On 9 April 2008, 90 former LIFG fighters were released from Libyan prisons. In May and June 2010, another 230 arrested LIFG fighters were released upon Saif al-Islam al-Qaddafi's initiative. A young Libyan LIFG warrior was also allowed to return home after he had renounced violence (*Asbarq al-Awsat* 2010). On 11 February 2011, *Al-Hayat* reported that over the next few days, other former LIFG fighters were to be released from Libyan prisons. Abu Sahib al-Libi, a former LIFG leader, commented from his exile in the United Kingdom that the government in Tripoli had not imposed any preconditions on the release, either on the prisoners in Libya or on the LIFG. According to information provided by *Al-Hayat*, 345 Islamists from various factions were still being detained in Libyan prisons as of February 2011 (*Al-Hayat* 2011a).

After the outbreak of the insurgency against the Qaddafi regime, on 17 February 2011, many LIFG fighters returned to Libya and joined with the rebels. All in all, about 800 LIFG fighters are assumed to have fought

alongside the rebels. They formed several brigades. It is almost impossible to determine which LIFG fighters had previously left Al-Qaeda. Nevertheless, the LIFG fighters, most of them with considerable combat experience gained in Afghanistan and Iraq, represented militarily the most efficient units on the rebel side. They will, in future, certainly play an influential role in the new Libyan security forces as well. This in turn may become important for the rest of Africa, if the new Libyan government becomes as active in African politics as the Qaddafi regime was.

The Growing Influence of Al-Qaeda in African Nations

In 2011, Al-Qaeda is decisively stronger and more well-organized than it was at the time of the attacks of 9/11 – not least on the African continent. Osama bin Laden's death in Abbottabad on 2 May 2011 has accelerated the restructuring, first initiated in 2006, of the network into the first global, non-governmental terror organization.

Ayman az-Zawahiri was elected the new head of this terror organization on 16 June 2011. In the years since 2006, he has decisively planned and pushed the structural conversion agenda. Saif al-Adel, another Egyptian, is also represented at the strategic command level, with Abu Yahya al-Libi also present as a third African. Accordingly, all presumed members at the strategic command level have their origins on the African continent. In addition, Abu Yahya al-Libi is considered to be az-Zawahiri's potential successor. Sub-Saharan Africans, in contrast, do not (or not yet), play such a prominent role in Al-Qaeda.

Nevertheless, in the period between 2009 and 2011, Al-Qaeda activities have been registered in 19 African nations or regions: Algeria, Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Puntland, Somalia, Somaliland, South Africa, Sudan and Uganda. Al-Qaeda appears to be advancing more and more from the north and east to central and southern Africa. Even in South Africa there are now Al-Shabab support groups.

In Nigeria, the Sunni terrorist group Boko Haram² (Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad/People Committed to the Propagation of the

2 “Boko Haram” is the name of the terrorist group in Hausa, but it is not the official name of the sect. Boko Haram essentially means “no Western education”. The group is also known as the “Taliban”. It is an extremely conservative, fundamentalist group that radically repudiates elections, “Western education” and “the Western lifestyle” (Adesoji 2010).

Prophet's Teachings and Jihad), founded by Ustaz Mohammed Yusuf in Maiduguri in 2002, has become more and more involved with Al-Qaeda. Several fighters from Boko Haram have been given military training by Al-Shabab in Somalia. They allegedly have contact with AQIM as well (*Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy* 2011). Boko Haram plotted the first two suicide attacks in Nigerian history in the summer of 2011. On 17 June 2011 a suicide attack was launched on police headquarters in the capital city of Abuja. This was followed by another suicide attack, in the form of a car bomb, on the regional UN headquarters in Abuja, carried out on 26 August 2011. Eighteen people died in this attack, including 15 UN employees (*Süddeutsche Zeitung* 2011b).

The successful plotting of suicide attacks is a major obstacle for terrorist groups to surmount in their radicalization process. Once this obstacle has been overcome, it is often followed by a rapprochement with Al-Qaeda. The development of Al-Shabab as an organization followed a similar path. It was only after they launched their first suicide attack on 18 September 2006 in Baidoa – which was also the first-ever suicide attack in the history of Somalia – did the slow process of approaching Al-Qaeda begin (Krech 2011c: 3).

Combating Al-Shabab requires economic, political and developmental policies that are capable of stabilizing all the nations situated on the Horn of Africa. So far, such a strategy does not exist. Furthermore, the readiness and willingness of NATO and the US to engage in a military commitment and operation in Somalia is negligible. As it stands, we can only hope that drones and US Special Forces will be sufficient to prevent Al-Shabab from conquering Somalia completely. EU support provided to Interim President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed has also included the training of 1,000 Somali soldiers for the Somali government forces operating in Uganda. Since March 2010, the 140 EU military instructors – who originate from 14 different EU nations – have also included 13 instructors from the Bundeswehr, the German Federal Armed Forces. The forces of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) also have to be further reinforced. In 2007, 3,500 African AMISOM soldiers were deployed to Mogadishu; based on the UN Security Council's decision of 23 December 2010, they are to be reinforced to the strength of 12,000. The majority of the AMISOM personnel come from Burundi and Uganda. The AMISOM forces will have to bear the brunt of any military engagement with Al-Shabab.

AQIM will have to be fought on both the regional and the international level because of the competition between Algeria and Morocco for supremacy in the Maghreb. Neither of these two nations cooperates in combating AQIM. Algeria invited Burkina Faso, Chad, Libya, Mali, Mauritania and Niger to a conference called "Terrorism and Border-crossing Crime in the

Sahel and Desert Nations” on 16 March 2010 in Algiers. Morocco was not invited. Then, on 21 April 2010 Algeria, Mali, Mauritania and Niger announced the establishment of a “Joint Headquarters for Major Operations in the Sahara” against AQIM. The headquarters for this collaboration have been established in the city of Tamanrasset, situated in the south of Algeria. All four nations involved will assign several thousand soldiers each to the headquarters, who are to then comb the Sahara in a coordinated manner, searching for the AQIM brigades (*Elaph.com* 2010a; *Al-Riyadh* 2010; *Jane’s Intelligence Weekly* 2010a). The group of nations operating under Algeria’s lead, which is coordinating their defence efforts against AQIM, refuses to partake in any counter-terror cooperation with either France or the US. They want to destroy AQIM using regional forces alone. However, other sub-Saharan governments, particularly Mali’s, are believed to lack trust in Algeria and its ability to effectively carry out this task.

On the other hand, Morocco, in its efforts to fight AQIM, cooperates particularly closely with the French, Spanish and US governments. Several joint US–Moroccan counter-terror exercises have already been conducted (*Elaph.com* 2010b). As such, African governments are increasingly recognizing the threat to their internal security posed by the growing influence of Al-Qaeda, while they are at the same time struggling to coordinate their responses to it. They have, nevertheless, at least begun to start planning and implementing coordinated action to fight the Al-Qaeda organization, even if there is ultimately still a long way to go on this front.

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Der wachsende Einfluss von Al-Qaida auf dem afrikanischen Kontinent

Zusammenfassung: Der Einfluss von Al-Qaida in Afrika wächst. In den Jahren 2009 bis 2011 wurden Al-Qaida-Aktivitäten in 19 afrikanischen Staaten und Gebieten registriert. In Afrika gibt es vier Al-Qaida-Regionalorganisationen, die wiederum oft mehrere Unterorganisationen haben: Ägyptischer Islamischer Jihad (EIJ), Libysch-Islamische Kampfgruppe (LIFG), Al-Qaida im Islamischen Maghreb (AQIM, mit den Unterorganisationen Al-Qaida im Sudan, Al-Qaida in Mali, Al-Qaida in Marokko, Al-Qaida in Mauritien) sowie die Al-Shabab in Somalia. Nach dem Tod von Osama bin Laden am 2. Mai 2011 ist der Einfluss von afrikanischen Führern in der Al-Qaida deutlich angewachsen. Alle drei mutmaßlichen Mitglieder der strategischen Führungsebene kommen aus Afrika. Die Revolutionen des "Arabischen Frühlings" haben Al-Qaida nicht geschadet. Diese Entwicklungen könnten zu einer weiteren Ausbreitung von Al-Qaida auf dem Afrikanischen Kontinent beitragen.

Schlagwörter: Afrika, Internationaler Terrorismus, Terroristen/Terrorgruppe