

# ISSUE BRIEF

No. 4059 | SEPTEMBER 30, 2013

## Kenya Attack: Vigilance Required to Combat al-Shabaab's Resurgence

*Charlotte Florance; James Phillips; James Jay Carafano, PhD;  
Steven Bucci, PhD; and Peter Brookes*

**A**l-Shabaab's bloody four-day siege on the Westgate Shopping Center in Nairobi, Kenya, comes on the heels of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's calls for attacks on non-Muslims. Al-Shabaab's close affiliation with al-Qaeda has made its fighters more sophisticated in their use of terrorist tactics—evidenced in the Nairobi attack by the group's ability to deploy a well-coordinated team of operatives on a suicide mission. The Nairobi attack underscored al-Shabaab's role as an increasingly effective al-Qaeda affiliate deserving of the al-Qaeda brand.

To combat the resurgence of a “down but not out” al-Shabaab and the greater legitimacy the organization garnered in the eyes of Islamist extremists through the Nairobi attack, the U.S. and its allies in the region should develop a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy for the Horn of Africa that addresses the increasing number of al-Qaeda-linked groups operating throughout the continent.

**What Is al-Shabaab?** Islamist militants in Somalia have long been connected to the global al-Qaeda network.<sup>1</sup> While living in Sudan, Osama bin Laden developed relationships with various Islamist militants throughout Somalia. Al-Qaeda suspended

its network in Somalia in the 1990s, but these Somali militants would later lead today's Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, commonly known as “al-Shabaab,” under the current leadership of al-Qaeda-trained Ahmed Abdi Aw-Mohamed, also known as “Godane.”<sup>2</sup>

In 2006, al-Shabaab was formed as an offshoot militant branch of the Islamic Courts Union, later the Council of Islamic Courts. Following the incursion of Ethiopian security forces into Somalia, the group's militants dispersed throughout the country, staking out strongholds in central and southern Somalia.

Al-Shabaab was designated by the U.S. State Department as a foreign terrorist organization in early 2008 and formally allied with al-Qaeda in early 2012. On July 11, 2010, al-Shabaab made international headlines after the group bombed a World Cup finals viewing party in Kampala, Uganda, killing 80 people, including an American. The attack highlighted the group's desire to have an impact beyond its “local” struggle and force Uganda's military to withdraw from the African Union peacekeeping force in Somalia (AMISOM).

Al-Shabaab has suffered several strategic losses in recent years, including retreat from the core of Mogadishu in August 2011 and the loss of control of Kismayo in September 2012, resulting in loss of revenues and their easy-to-access arms and supplies. These losses have forced the group to replace guerilla tactics with terrorism.

**Regional Involvement Against al-Shabaab.** Terrorism has long occupied the minds of the region's leaders since al-Qaeda bombed the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in 1998.

---

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at  
<http://report.heritage.org/ib4059>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison  
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

**The Heritage Foundation**  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002  
(202) 546-4400 | [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

---

Al-Qaeda also attempted an attack against an Israeli charter flight from Mombasa, Kenya, and bombed the Paradise Hotel in Mombasa in November 2002, killing 13 individuals, including three Israelis.

Since 2007, al-Shabaab has carried out nearly 550 attacks, with over 200 outside Somalia in 2012 alone.<sup>3</sup> Beyond the loss of life attributed to al-Shabaab, the group has severely disrupted the region's economic activities, particularly in Kenya, which is heavily dependent on international tourism.

Following Ethiopia's Western-backed military intervention in Somalia (and subsequent withdrawal), the U.N.-backed AMISOM was charged with defending the Transitional Federal Government in Somalia from an increasingly more powerful and capable al-Shabaab guerilla force. In March 2007, Uganda was the first country to send forces into Somalia under the AMISOM banner. Presently, Uganda maintains more than 6,000 personnel in AMISOM, the highest of any partner nations.<sup>4</sup>

In October 2011, Kenya intervened in Somalia unilaterally to directly combat al-Shabaab following a string of terrorist attacks in Kenya. Kenya aimed to secure a buffer zone inside Somalia to eliminate uncontrolled border crossings into Kenya and remove al-Shabaab from the strategic port of Kismayo. In February 2012, Kenyan forces were integrated into AMISOM; Kenya currently provides 5,500 troops to AMISOM.

However, not all regional engagement has been to the detriment of al-Shabaab. Since 2007, Eritrea has provided varying levels of arms and supplies to al-Shabaab. Eritrea continues to use the terrorist group as a proxy force against Ethiopia and their long-running disputes. A panel of U.N. experts recently emphasized Eritrea's ongoing involvement in undermining the security environment in Somalia and "obtained direct testimonies and concrete evidence of Eritrean support to Abdi Wal and Mohamed Wali

Sheikh Ahmed Nuur." Nuur has been described as a "political coordinator for al Shabaab" and a financial beneficiary of Eritrea.<sup>5</sup>

### **What the U.S. Should Do to Counter al-Shabaab.**

- **Increase intelligence operations.** U.S. intelligence agencies should coordinate with local administrations and actors on the ground through a variety of methods, including manned intelligence and paid informants. Furthermore, while the lack of security prevents the State Department and Department of Defense from establishing permanent operations in Somalia, regular travel to Somalia is integral for understanding the political dynamics and the social structures necessary to counter terrorist networks.
- **Coordinate and train regional militaries.** America's interest in countering terrorism in the region, building security capacity, and combating piracy is strong. Congress and the Administration should keep these priorities in mind when deliberating the future of U.S. Africa Command, an excellent resource to provide training to regional militaries in counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and border control. Special preference should be given to countries that contribute troops to AMISOM.
- **List Eritrea as a state sponsor of terrorism.** Eritrea has continuously provided al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab with the means to commit acts of terrorism. Because U.N. member states often prevent biting sanctions from being enforced, the U.S. should implement tougher bilateral sanctions against the government of Eritrea.

1. See James Phillips, "Somalia and al-Qaeda: Implications for the War on Terrorism," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1526, April 5, 2002, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2002/04/somalia-and-al-qaeda-implications-for-the-war-on-terrorism>.

2. Morgan Lorraine Roach and Ray Walser, "Saving Somalia: The Next Steps for the Obama Administration," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2691, May 12, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/05/saving-somalia-the-next-steps-for-the-obama-administration>.

3. Erin Miller, "Al-Shabaab Attack on Westgate Mall in Kenya," National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, September 2013, p. 1, [http://www.start.umd.edu/start/publications/br/STARTBackgroundReport\\_alShabaabKenya\\_Sept2013.pdf](http://www.start.umd.edu/start/publications/br/STARTBackgroundReport_alShabaabKenya_Sept2013.pdf) (accessed September 27, 2013).

4. Burundi provides around 5,400 troops. Djibouti and Sierra Leone provide nearly 1,000 troops each.

5. Louis Charbonneau, "Eritrea Pays Warlord to Influence Somalia—U.N. Experts," Reuters, July 17, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/17/us-somalia-eritrea-un-idUSBRE96G06U20130717> (accessed September 27, 2013).

■ **Counter terrorist financing.** There are no laws in Somalia criminalizing terrorist financing. Although Somalia lacks a formal banking sector, reports indicate an increase of establishment banks throughout the country. The U.S. should encourage the Somali government to develop the capacity to track, seize, and freeze terrorist assets.

**False Narrative.** The Obama Administration wrongly interpreted AMISOM's success at pushing al-Shabaab "out of Somalia's main cities and towns" as having degraded the group's capacity to carry out terrorist operations.<sup>6</sup> In reality, the group has been stealing humanitarian aid, stockpiling weapons and ammunitions, and escalating the frequency of violent attacks—all signs that the group is not on a path to defeat.<sup>7</sup> The Westgate siege is a painful reminder that the threat posed by al-Shabaab has not been mitigated and that vigilance is required on behalf of all partners to combat global terrorism in the region.

The group's deadly attacks against high-profile targets in Mogadishu (and most recently in Nairobi) point to a resurgent terrorist group with international aims. The Administration should not underestimate the threat of al-Shabaab for the sake of trumpeting U.S. success against al-Qaeda in the Horn of Africa.

—**Charlotte Florance** is a Research Associate for Economic Freedom in Africa and the Middle East and **James Phillips** is Senior Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies; **James Jay Carafano, PhD**, is Vice President of Foreign and Defense Policy Studies, E. W. Richardson Fellow, and Director of the Davis Institute; **Steven P. Bucci, PhD**, is Director of the Allison Center; and **Peter Brookes** is Senior Fellow for National Security Affairs in the Davis Institute at The Heritage Foundation.

---

6. News release, "Ambassador Johnnie Carson on the Situation in Mali and the Sahel, Somalia and the DRC," U.S. Africa Command, October 3, 2012, <http://www.africom.mil/Newsroom/Transcript/9997/transcript-ambassador-johnnie-carson-on-the-situat> (accessed September 27, 2013).

7. News release, "UK Aid Supplies Lost to Somali Militants," BBC News, August 11, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-23653789> (accessed September 27, 2013).