

Al-Shabaab in the Aftermath of the Attack on Nairobi's Westgate Mall

Written by David H. Shinn

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DAVID H. SHINN, OCT 10 2013

The Somalia-based and al-Qaeda-affiliated organization known as al-Shabaab (the Youth) conducted a well-organized attack on the undefended Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya, on 21 September 2013. The attack left at least 67 civilians dead and injured an even larger number. While this was an especially easy target to hit by a small group of terrorists who were prepared to die in the process, the devastation underscored that al-Shabaab remains a serious threat in terms of killing innocent civilians.

Kenyan military forces first entered southern Somalia in October 2011 in response to kidnappings of tourists and foreign aid personnel inside Kenya by al-Shabaab. These attacks in Kenya were harming the tourist industry and underscoring the instability along the Kenya-Somalia border. Until this time, Kenya had remained largely aloof from developments inside Somalia except for the fact that Kenya received a huge number of Somali refugees from the conflict.

After Kenyan troops entered southern Somalia, they made slow progress in pushing back al-Shabaab. Together with allied Somali militia from the region around the key southern port city of Kismayu, they did not take full control of Kismayu from al-Shabaab until June 2013. The port provided much of al-Shabaab's revenue; its loss was a serious setback for the terrorist organization.

Since Kenyan forces entered Somalia, al-Shabaab has used the presence of additional foreign troops (never mind that al-Shabaab has several hundred foreign jihadis) inside Somalia as a rallying cry and threatened that it would attack Kenyans inside Kenya. Since October 2011, there have been dozens of small attacks, usually against civilian targets, inside Kenya. These attacks have killed and injured scores of people and are generally attributed to al-Shabaab, although it has not taken responsibility for all of them.

Analysts who have followed developments in Somalia in recent years were not surprised that al-Shabaab finally succeeded in a large attack,[1] although apparently no outsiders including intelligence services in the region and in the West was aware of the timing and targeting of Westgate Mall. In July 2010, al-Shabaab attacked two bars in Kampala, Uganda, killing more than 70 persons, in retribution for the Ugandan government's military participation in the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) that is aimed at the defeat of al-Shabaab. The only surprise for many of us is that a large attack against a soft target in Kenya did not happen sooner.

Some commentators were arguing before the Westgate Mall attack that al-Shabaab was nearly finished as an organization.[2] While al-Shabaab had been significantly weakened militarily and was troubled by serious internal divisions, it still controlled a large swath of rural central and southern Somalia and had, according to the UN Monitoring group on Somalia, an estimated 5,000 persons under arms. It was much diminished as a military threat, but not a defeated organization. In addition, its opposition, the Somali Federal Government and AMISOM had plenty of problems of their own. It was not foreordained that al-Shabaab would soon collapse.

Since the Westgate Mall attack, a surprising number of analysts have concluded that al-Shabaab is not only alive and well but stronger than ever.[3] This, too, does not represent accurately the current situation. Al-Shabaab has

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shown that it is very competent at masterminding and implementing a major attack on a soft target in a neighboring country that results in the death primarily of defenseless women and children who never had anything to do with the conflict in Somalia. In other words, al-Shabaab remains a serious terrorist threat, at least in the East Africa region.

But the attack on Westgate Mall also underscores the military weakness of al-Shabaab. In Somalia, it continues to be effective in carrying out political assassinations and the occasional suicide bombing, which usually kills innocent Somalis. Its ability to confront professional AMISOM military forces, especially those from Uganda, Kenya and Burundi, is negligible and has not improved in the aftermath of the Westgate Mall bombing. It is even questionable if al-Shabaab would be effective against the improving Somali government security forces. Al-Shabaab does successfully conduct IED attacks and an occasional ambush against AMISOM troops and Somali government security forces, but it has done little else in the past year.

The Westgate Mall attack resulted in a publicity bonanza for al-Shabaab and may have the short-term effect of enticing more foreign jihadis from the Sahel, Afghanistan, Syria and other locations to come to Somalia where they perceive more "action". It may also result in an uptick in foreign jihadi funding. But the Westgate Mall attack is not a successful long-term strategy for seizing power in Somalia, creating an Islamic state, and implementing a strict and repressive form of sharia. Abdi Ismail Samatar, professor at the University of Minnesota and someone who has an intimate knowledge of Somalia, recently told *Aljazeera* that al-Shabaab "has imposed an incredible tyranny on the population and has disabled them from rebuilding their war-torn country." [4] This is not the way to win the hearts and minds of Somalis.

As is so often the case with initial information about terrorist attacks, some of the early information about the al-Shabaab attack on Westgate Mall was inaccurate. For more than a week, most reports said that 10 to 15 persons took part in the attack. Both the al-Shabaab twitter account and the Kenyan government said that at least two of the terrorists were American citizens or had U.S. connections and one was linked to the U.K. It now appears that the terrorists numbered three teams of two each and there is no evidence so far that they had any connection with the United States or the United Kingdom. This should help reduce concern in the Somali diaspora about a possible backlash in both countries.

There is some evidence that one or more of the terrorists were linked to the Kenyan extremist organization known as al-Hijra, which has long supplied recruits and financial support to al-Shabaab. Al-Hijra is a non-Somali Islamist group with support centered on the Swahili coast of Kenya and Tanzania.

So where does the Westgate Mall attack leave al-Shabaab? It provides a boost in publicity and probably a brief uptick in foreign recruits and jihadi financing. It demonstrates that al-Shabaab can carry out future terrorist attacks against soft targets in the region. But it does not improve al-Shabaab's long-term military situation in Somalia nor does it win the support of significant numbers of Somalis, who just want an end to conflict, the provision of normal services by a Somali government that is committed to improving their lives, and the removal as soon as possible of all foreign forces, both those supporting the Somali government and al-Shabaab.

There will likely be stepped up attacks on al-Shabaab controlled areas by Kenyan forces in southern Somalia and possibly by other AMISOM troops in the greater Mogadishu region. Kenya will continue its crackdown on the home grown al-Hijra organization. U.S. Navy SEALs conducted on 5 October 2013 the most significant raid inside Somalia since 2009 at the al-Shabaab-held port city of Baraawe south of Mogadishu. The city is believed to be a haven for al-Shabaab foreign fighters. There may be more of these kinds of raids by U.S. Special Forces.

It is important that Kenya and other countries avoid a crackdown on innocent Somali populations living in their countries as this would be both unfair and would increase recruitment prospects for al-Shabaab. It is also important that Somali security forces replace the Kenyans in southern Somalia as quickly as possible, although the departure of Kenyan troops in the aftermath of the Westgate Mall bombing would send the wrong message.

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[1] See Paul Cruickshank and Tim Lister in CNN's "Al-Shabaab Breaks New Ground with Complex Nairobi Attack" at www.cnn.com/2013/09/22/world/meast/kenya-mall-al-shabaab-analysis/index.html.

[2] See Stig Hansen in African Arguments' "Somalia: Rumours of Al-Shabaab's Death Are Greatly Exaggerated" at <http://africanarguments.org/2013/04/25/somalia-rumours-of-al-shabaab%E2%80%99s-death-are-greatly-exaggerated-%E2%80%93-by-Stig-Hansen/>.

[3] See Richard Norton-Taylor in the Guardian's "Al-Shabaab Will Emerge Stronger after Nairobi Mall Attack, Warns Analyst" at www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/24/al-shabaab-stronger-nairobi-warns-analyst.

[4] See Abdi Ismail Samatar in Aljazeera's "The Nairobi Massacre and the Genealogy of the Tragedy" at www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/09/nairobi-massacre-genealogy-tragedy-2013925121727642903.html.

About the author:

Dr. David Shinn has taught African Affairs in the Elliot School of International Affairs at George Washington University since 2001. He previously served for 37 years in the U.S. Foreign Service, including as an ambassador to Ethiopia and Burkina Faso. He is the co-author of *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* (2012) and the *Historical Dictionary of Ethiopia* (2013).