

## **Al-Shabab's attack at Westgate Mall:**

### **Somalia and Regional Instability**

#### **Irit Back**

The deadly terrorist attack by Somali *al-Shabab* militants on an affluent shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya, the commercial, diplomatic and cultural hub of east and central Africa, claimed the lives of at least 72 persons and injured over 200 people. The brazen operation, which took three full days to suppress, highlighted the growing tension between neighboring East African countries Somalia and Kenya, and indicated that sustained regional stability and development remained a tall order.

Prior to the attack, Somalia was actually considered a relative success story, at least from a regional perspective. To be sure, it has been frequently referred to in the scholarly and media discourses as the prime example of a "failed state." Beside the fact that it lacks a viable political center, Somalia is in effect not a single political unit but rather an amalgam of at least three distinct entities (Somalia, Somaliland and Puntland). As such, the military and political successes in recent years of the 17,000-strong African Union force (African Union Mission in Somalia: AMISOM) have been quite surprising. In September 2012, AMISOM forces were able to capture Merka, a port south of the country's capital, Mogadishu, from *al-Shabab* forces; a month later, together with Kenya Defense Forces and Ugandan troops, AMISOM took over all the key areas in Kismayu, a southern Somali port city considered *al-Shabab's* last stronghold. Although many had feared great bloodshed, *al-Shabab* fighters withdrew before the AU forces entered the city. Beyond its military successes, the African forces made progress towards stabilizing the country's internal order, which had been in a perpetually turbulent state since the collapse of the Siad Barre regime in 1991. This relative stability was especially noticeable in major cities such as Mogadishu and Kismayu, which has been undergoing significant reconstruction efforts after militants were pushed out of these areas.

Moreover, the victory of civil and political activist Hassan Sheikh Mohamud in the country's September 2010 presidential elections raised hopes that the new

government would discard "destructive clan-based politics in favor of anticorruption measures and national reconciliation as well as embracing vital security-sector and economic reforms."<sup>1</sup> A recent attack on his presidential convoy, however, served as a reminder of Somalia's continued fragility. The convoy was approaching the port town of Marka, south of Mogadishu, when *al-Shabab* rebels apparently fired rocket-propelled grenades at it, "underscore[ing] the apparent ease with which... *al-Shabab* rebels can infiltrate areas under the control of Somali government forces and African peacekeepers and strike at the heart of government."<sup>2</sup>

The roots of present-day events can be traced to February 2005, when the country's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) was formed in Kenya after two years of peace talks between various Somali clans and factions. In September 2006, the TFG was relocated in Mogadishu. Yet, the TFG did not find a political vacuum upon arriving in Somalia, as the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), a coalition of local *shari'a* courts and Islamist activists, had seized control of Mogadishu the previous June. Although the Islamists' short period of rule was marked by relative stability, the ICU's victory triggered apprehension in and outside Somalia, particularly in neighboring Ethiopia and among Western governments, which viewed the ascent of radical Islam in Somalia as a direct threat. In December 2006, in response to the call of the TFG's President, Ethiopian troops, backed by the U.S., invaded Somalia up to the outskirts of Mogadishu.

The invitation for foreign military intervention turned out to be very unpopular in the eyes of many Somalis, and ignited a new wave of internal violence throughout the country. The ICU-led coalition contained both moderate and extremist factions, but the TFG's support for foreign intervention increased the popularity of *al-Shabab*, the best-trained, best-equipped, and most strongly committed faction in the coalition. Ideologically, *al-Shabab* follows the doctrine of *takfir*, which allows its members to declare other Muslims unbelievers (*kafir*), reject and resist the presence of foreigners on their land, and even commit suicide ("martyrdom," in their parlance) in order to kill their enemies. *Al-Shabab* was also rightly suspected of being committed to the larger global war against the West advocated by *al-Qa'ida*. It is also noteworthy that beginning in 2005 the *al-Qa'ida* core started to make considerable gains in Somalia, and in September 2009, *al-Shabab* made a public declaration of allegiance to Osama bin Laden. Last year *al-Shabab* formally linked itself to *al-Qa'ida*, and the two

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<sup>1</sup> This year he was even listed in *TIME* Magazine's 100 most influential people in the world  
<http://time100.time.com/2013/04/18/time-100/slide/hassan-sheik-mohamud/>

<sup>2</sup> *Reuters*, September 3, 2013.

groups now cooperate closely "on everything from indoctrination and basic infantry skills to advanced training in explosives and assassination."<sup>3</sup>

*Al-Shabab*'s ideological and religious zeal is a matter of great concern to Somalia's neighbors Kenya and Ethiopia. Although Ethiopia is historically a Christian country, its population is now almost 40 percent Muslim, including many ethnic Somalis. As its military intervention in Somalia during 2006 prompted a wave of anti-Ethiopian reactions both in Somalia and within Ethiopia, the Ethiopian government tried to adopt a more cautious and conciliatory stand, focusing on efforts to stabilize its government. Kenya, on the other hand, adopted a more activist stand toward its northern neighbor. In October 2011 Kenya launched Operation Linda Nchi (Kiswahili for "Protect the Nation") and has since deployed a 4000-strong force in Somalia, including both ground and air units, between their common border and the port town of Kismayu. Among the many reasons for Kenya's intervention, three stand out: growing Islamic radicalism, problems related to borders and refugees, and aspirations for regional stability and development.

Although Kenya's Muslims constitute only about 10 percent of Kenya's total population, their geographical distribution, combined with a rise in religious militancy, created a sense of alarm, and stoked inter-religious tensions, particularly in Garissa County in North-East Kenya and in Nairobi (such as the activities of the Muslim Youth Centre (MYC) that was identified by the UN Monitoring Group on Eritrea and Somalia as the recruiting, fundraising, and training arm of *al-Shabab* in Kenya). Moreover, there are fears that Islamic radicalism is related to the appearance of a secessionist movement in the predominantly Muslim coastal area. Although the founders of the Mombasa Republican Council (which claimed that Mombasa and its surrounding coastal area are not part of Kenya and therefore should secede) were not exclusively Muslims, a strong response by the security forces to its activities may well provoke further radicalization amongst its largely Muslims supporters.

Another major challenge to Kenyan stability is the issue of Somali refugees. Twenty-two years of civil war in Somalia resulted in approximately one-fourth of its 7.5 million people being internally displaced or living outside the country as refugees. In January 2013, 544,480 Somali refugees were officially present in Kenya, and additional 25,000 persons were expected to join them by the end of 2013. The vast majority of them live in the Dadaab refugee camp, which was established almost twenty years ago and designed to shelter a maximum of 90,000 persons. New refugees continue to arrive, but the Kenyan government has suspended full-scale registration. Many of the new arrivals are fleeing insecurity, harassment, and possible

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<sup>3</sup> "Al Shabaab: Background on the Somalia-based Terrorist Group that Attacked a Nairobi Mall," *Brookings Now*, September 23, 2013. Available at: <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/brookings-now/posts/2013/09/al-shabaab-somalia-terrorist-nairobi-mall-attack>

recruitment by armed groups.<sup>4</sup> This constant flow of Somali refugees is related to the chronic instability in the porous border area between the two states, known as the "troubled region," which carries potential for the conflict to spread.<sup>5</sup> The matter is critical to the Kenyan economy, as murders and kidnappings at holiday resorts near the Somali border pose a clear threat to one of its main branches - tourism.<sup>6</sup>

Kenya is a key player in the volatile East Africa region. Even prior to its military involvement in Somalia, it played a major part in the mediation efforts which brokered an end to Sudan's civil war, and it is a major actor within two relatively successful regional organizations – the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the East African Community (EAC). Although facing major challenges of its own, particularly deep ethnic divides within Kenyan society as revealed by the post-election violence of 2008, Kenya has nonetheless attained a measure of economic development and political stabilization. The attack on the Westgate shopping mall, however, served as a painful reminder of the destructive power of political instability and Islamic radicalism in this region and elsewhere in Africa, and casts a long shadow over the prospects for stability, security, and development in the continent.

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<sup>4</sup> 2013 UNHCR country operations profile – Kenya, available at:  
<http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e483a16.html>

<sup>5</sup> Ken Menkhaus, *Kenya-Somalia Border Conflict Analysis*, available at:  
[http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PNADT520.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADT520.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Kenya Tourism Report Q4 2013, Business Monitor International, p.9.