# Al-Shabab's Dangerous Affair with Al-Qaeda

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Drawing on the recent Westgate attack in Kenya, this article critically examines al-Shabab's deepening ties with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, arguing that this relationship has transformed it into an ultra-radical, transnational terrorist group, with links extending beyond Somalia. The article further argues that the globalising nature of the modern world, particularly the ongoing ICT (i.e. social media) revolution, easily permits the spread of terrorism beyond borders, facilitating the transformation of domestic terrorism into transnational terrorism. As such, the article observes that an effective response to terrorism today requires a coordinated agenda that fuses domestic and international strategies.

**Key Words:** Westgate attack; Kenya; Somalia; Al-Shabab; Al-Qaeda.

## Introduction

At least 72 people lost their lives and over 200 people were injured when on 21 September 2013 a group of Islamist gunmen stormed the high-end Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya, and indiscriminately opened fire on shoppers enjoying their weekend. Reportedly, the gunmen shouted in the local Swahili language that Muslims would be allowed to leave while all others were subjected to their mass shooting. The gunmen held hostages and later engaged in gun battles with Kenyan security forces in an attack that lasted for four days (Onuoha, 2013). The Somali-based and al-Qaeda-linked terrorist group, al-Shabab – 'the youth' in Arabic – claimed responsibility for the mass killings through its now closed Twitter account, releasing the names and nationalities of nine of the jihadist attackers (see Table 1). In one tweet, the al-Shabab leadership registered their refusal to negotiate and later said: 'For long we have

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waged war against the Kenyans in our land; now its time to shift the battleground and take the war to their land' (Agbiboa, 2013a).

The Westgate attack did not come as a surprise to many observers who have been attentive to al-Shabab's repeated warning that it will avenge the invasion of southern Somalia by Kenyan Defence Forces (KDF) in October 2011 following attacks by alleged al-Shabab fighters in northern Kenya near the Somali border (Joselow, 2011). Kenya's roughly 4,000 troops in southern Somalia were subsequently incorporated into a larger African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) force of over 17,000 soldiers with a United Nations mandate to protect the interim Somali government (Agbiboa, 2013a). As shown in table 2, Kenya is one of the five troop-contributing countries (TCCs) to the AMISOM which since 2011 has forced al-Shabab fighters to retreat from the Somali capital, Mogadishu, as well as from other strongholds (Onuoha, 2013).

**Table 1:** Names and Nationalities of the Westgate Attackers as Released by Al-Shabab

| S/No | Name | Age | Country |
|------|------|-----|---------|
| 1 | Ahmed Mohamed Isse | 22 | Minnesota, USA |
| 2 | Abdifatah Osman Keynadiid | 24 | Minneapolis, USA |
| 3 | General Mustaf Nuradin | 27 | Kansas City, USA |
| 4 | Qasim Said | 22 | Garrison, Kenya |
| 5 | Ahmed Nasir Shirdon | 24 | United Kingdom |
| 6 | Zaki Jma'a Arale | 20 | Hargeisa, Somalia |
| 7 | Ismail Guled | 23 | Finland |
| 8 | Said Nuh | 25 | Kismayu, Somalia |
| 9 | Abdirazaq Mowlid | 24 | Canada |

Source: Onuoha (2013: 4). Note that the identities of the attackers are yet to be confirmed

**Table 2:** Troop-Contributing Countries (TCCs) to AMISOM

| S/No | TCCs | Commencement | Number of Troops |
|------|------|--------------|------------------|
| 1 | Burundi | December, 2007 | 5,432 |
| 2 | Djibouti | December, 2011 | 960 |
| 3 | Kenya | February, 2012 | 4,652 |
| 4 | Sierra Leone | April, 2012 | 850 |
| 5 | Uganda | March, 2007 | 6,223 |

Source: Onuoha (2013: 4).

In this article I argue that the Westgate attack not only (further) demonstrates al-Shabab's growing capability to launch deadly attacks outside its traditional Somali borders, it also points to the group's deepening ties with Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda organisation and its transnational jihadism. These conclusions are supported in three stages, beginning with a brief discussion of al-Shabab's origins and links. I then examine the transformation of al-Shabab's operational strategy, from domestic to transnational targets. Thereafter, I provide a brief historical synopsis of the al-Qaeda network and its global jihadist campaign, highlighting the organisation's ideology, global aims, and modus operandi.

**Al-Shabab's Origins and Links**

Since the military dictator Mohammed Siad Barre was forced out of office in 1991, the Somalian state has been in a state of perpetual anarchy – that is, in a situation where 'competing warlords and longstanding clan conflicts have prevented any single faction from seizing control decisively enough to effect widespread and lasting stability in the country' (Wise, 2011: 2). The ongoing feudal struggles and civil discord that followed the collapse of Barre's government led to a serious humanitarian crisis. Since 1991 hundreds of thousands of Somalis have lost their lives due to violence and starvation, while over one million Somalis have fled the country, creating a massive

diaspora.[1] The deepening crisis resulted in the arrival of a UN Peacekeeping Mission and the US military – 'Operations Restore Hope' – in 1992. In September 2001, however, the UN announced the withdrawal of its entire international staff from Somalia, saying it was no longer able to guarantee their safety. In the following year, the US announced increased military operations in the country, which it suspected of being an al-Qaeda refuge (*The Guardian*, 23 February, 2012).

Perhaps the most significant attempt to tackle the protracted crisis in Somalia came on 10 October 2004 when a Transitional Federal Government (TFG), comprising representatives from Somalia's largest clans, was inaugurated in Kenya, with Abdullahi Yusuf elected president. Upon inauguration, Yusuf appealed to the international community 'to stand by us and help us disarm our militias.' Assured of Ethiopia's protection, the TFG moved into the southcentral Somali town of Baidoa in February 2006 but failed to rein in clan politics or to stamp its authority beyond Baidoa. In June 2006, a militia group known as the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) took control of the Somali capital Mogadishu, promising to restore order and create an Islamic state of Somalia. In July, Ethiopian troops, with tacit support from the US, entered Somalia to fight the Islamic militia, prompting ICU leader Sheikh Sharif Ahmed to declare a jihad against Ethiopia for backing the transitional government (Fergusson, 2013).

Al-Shabab was formed as a radical offshoot of the ICU, which, as earlier noted, controlled Mogadishu in 2006. Al-Shabab, which controls about half of southcentral Somalia, is estimated to have 7,000 to 9,000 fighters, mainly recruited within Somalia but also from Western countries (see Table 1; BBC News, 2013). Al-Shabab originally emerged as a remnant of al-Itihaad al Islamiya (AIAI) – a Wahhabi Islamist terrorist organisation which arose in Somalia in the 1980s with the intention of replacing Barre's regime with a sharia-governed Islamic state (Wise, 2011: 3). In 2000, AIAI remnants –

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[1] The Somalian economy is more dependent on remittances from the Diaspora than any other country in the world (Agbiboa, 2012: 1678).

mostly youths – reformed into al-Shabab and were incorporated into the ICU as its radical youth militia (Fergusson, 2013).

Ethiopia's military invasion of Somalia in 2006 marked a watershed in the development and radicalisation of al-Shabab. First, it provided al-Shabab with the opportunity to draw on deep-seated Somali hostility towards Ethiopia to recruit thousands of nationalist volunteers (Wise, 2011; Fergusson, 2013). Second, the invasion forced al-Shabab to adopt an effective guerrilla-style operational strategy as a means of resisting Ethiopian advance into the South (Menkhaus and Boucek, 2010). Third, 'by forcing the Islamic Courts Union leaders who had exerted a level of moderating influence on al-Shabab to flee Somalia, the invasion allowed the Islamist group to become even more radical, while at the same time severing its ties to other Somali organisations' (Wise, 2011: 2). Although the Ethiopian invasion succeeded in routing the ICU and pushing al-Shabab to the South of the country, it failed to eliminate Islamic radicalism in Somalia; in fact, it was a primary factor in the ultra-radical turn of al-Shabab, 'transforming the group from a small, relatively unimportant part of a more moderate Islamic movement into the most powerful and radical armed faction in the country' (Wise, 2011: 4). Ethiopia withdrew its military troops from Somalia in January 2009, replaced by the AU Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) which comprised thousands of Ugandan and Burundian peacekeeping forces (see Table 2).

**The Transformation of Al-Shabab**

Since 2008, al-Shabab has transformed itself, this time from a predominantly nationalist organisation with the localised agenda of driving the Ethiopians from Somalia to a 'hybrid movement' that has increasingly embraced the al-Qaeda-led global jihadist campaign against outposts of the West (Wise, 2011). Having formally pledged allegiance to Bin Laden's al-Qaeda in September 2009, al-Shabab has proven in recent years that it is well capable of launching deadly attacks outside its traditional Somalian borders. On 11 July 2010, for example, al-Shabab claimed responsibility for the twin bombing of two groups of fans watching the World Cup on television in the

Ugandan capital, Kampala, killing more than 70 people (Bergen et al. 2011). These strikes by al-Shabab, its first on foreign soil, were launched to punish Uganda for its active role in assisting AMISOM in Somalia (Agbiboa, 2013a). Following the attacks, one of al-Shabab's leaders, Mohamed Abdi Godane, threatened that 'What happened in Kampala was just the beginning' (cited in Onuoha, 2013: 3). It is against this backdrop that the recent Westgate attack should be understood.

Al-Shabab's growing friendship with al-Qaeda has significantly altered its structure, targets and operational strategy. First, al-Shabab's affiliation with al-Qaeda had profound effects on its leadership component. Following the death of its leader, Aden Hashi Ayro, in May 2008, al-Shabab's command structure welcomed a number of al-Qaeda core members into top leadership roles (Roggio, 2010). Second, until 2008 al-Shabab made use of relatively conventional guerrilla tactics in its attacks against the invading Ethiopian troops. However, the group's deepening ties with al-Qaeda has led it down the path of suicide attacks as a means to its ends. In October 2008, al-Shabab coordinated five suicide bomb attacks that struck the UN Development Programme (UNDP) compound, the Ethiopian consulate and various government offices, killing several dozen (Ali Noor, 2008).

Reflecting a shift largely driven by al-Shabab's growing friendship with al-Qaeda, its leadership has emphasized the development of training camps for suicide bombers across Somalia, with links across and beyond Africa (Wise, 2011: 8). Al-Shabab has been linked to the training of Nigeria's Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram – 'Western education is unlawful' in Hausa – which has killed over 10,000 people since its founding in 2002 (Agbiboa, 2013b, 2013c). In August 2011, General Carter Ham, Commander of the US Africa Command (AFRICOM), claimed that Boko Haram is financially sponsored by al-Qaeda and al-Shabab. The General also alleged that both jihadist organisations shared training and fighters with Boko Haram. He described this as 'the most dangerous thing to happen not only to the Africans, but to us as well' (International Institute for Strategic

Studies [IISS], 2011: 3). Both al-Shabab and Boko Haram share an ideology embedded in radical Salafism and their adherents are purportedly influenced by the Qur'anic phrase that states that, 'Anyone who is not governed by what Allah has revealed is among the transgressors' (cited in Agbiboa, 2013a). Group members view it as their divine mission to engage in a violent struggle against the 'enemies of Islam,' both at home and abroad. Its members see the overthrow of secular governments as justified since their rulers are seen as accepting or leaning towards the ways of Islam's enemies (Agbiboa, 2013b; Adesoji, 2010).

Al-Shabab may also be compared to Nigeria's splinter Islamist group Jama'at Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan (or Supporters of Islam in the Land of Sudan) which emerged in the Muslim north of Nigeria, with the avowed goal of 'restoring the dignity of the Muslims as it was in the time of the Caliphate... [and] the method of achieving these aims and goals is jihad' (Roggio, 2013). In 2012, Ansaru, as the group is commonly known, kidnapped and later killed seven foreigners. According to a statement reportedly released by the group, the kidnappings and killings were a response to attacks against Islam by European countries in places like Afghanistan and Mali (ibid). On 19 January, 2013, Ansaru Islamists ambushed a convoy of three buses carrying 180 Nigerian soldiers through Okene, Kogi State, en route to Mali, killing two soldiers. Similar to al-Shabab's justification of its Kenyan and Ugandan attacks, Ansaru claimed the national troop were 'aiming to demolish the Islamic Empire of Mali' and warned African countries to 'stop helping Western countries fight Muslims' (Zenn, 2013; see also, Agbiboa, 2013b). A similar justification for jihadist attack was recently observed in Lebanon where a pair of suicide bombs detonated outside the Iranian Embassy in Lebanon's capital, Beirut, killing 23 and injuring 147 in a bloody new ripple from neighbouring Syria's civil war. The al-Qaeda-linked Sunni jihadist group Abdullah Azzam Brigades claimed responsibility for the bombing via twitter, warning that more attacks would come unless the Lebanese based, Iranian backed Shiite militia Hezbollah stops sending fighters to support Syrian government forces (Walsh,

2013).

It is important to note that the growth of information and communication technology (ICT) has greatly enhanced the transformation of jihadist groups like al-Shabab, enabling them to stay in contact with the wider jihadist community, as well as to recruit and train potential fighters abroad (Saltman, 2008). In particular, al-Shabab has demonstrated that it is extremely media savvy and has used social media effectively to advance, and gain traction for, its cause. Websites like Facebook and Twitter have allowed terrorist groups like al-Shabab to 'disseminate propaganda to an impressionable age bracket that have (sic) the potential to empathize with their cause' (Galvin, 2013). Over the last decade, there has been an exponential rise in the number of terrorist internet sites from less than 100 to over 4,800 a couple of years ago (ibid). Thus, Kate Galvin (2013) argues that 'the internet has enabled terrorist organisations to research and coordinate attacks, to expand the reach of their propaganda to a global audience, to communicate with ethnic diasporas and international supporters, to foster public awareness and sympathy for their causes [as well as] to convey their messages to international audiences with whom it would otherwise be difficult to communicate.' Already, we have seen how, during the Westgate attack, al-Shabab used Twitter to disseminate messages goading Kenyan authorities and claiming responsibility for the deadly attack (Agbiboa, 2013a). Lastly, ICT has allowed al-Shabab to tap into wealthy Salafi networks keen on supporting al-Qaeda's global jihadist campaign. In August 2009, al-Shabab launched an online fundraising forum that raised over $40,000 from members of the Somalia Diaspora (UN Monitoring Group on Somalia, 2010).

The dramatic rise of radical Islamist terrorist groups like al-Shabab, starting in the 1980s and 1990s, has significantly contributed to the lethality of terrorist attacks perpetrated by religious-oriented terrorist groups. Empirical data gleaned from the website "Terrorism Knowledge Base" shows that between 1968 and 2005 Islamists groups were responsible for 93.6 percent of all terrorist attacks, and 86.9 percent of all casualties inflicted by religious-oriented terrorist groups

(cited in Piazza, 2009: 64). This finding is consistent with empirical studies by Asal and Blum (2005: 153-155) that shows a non-random clustering of high-casualty attacks perpetrated by al-Qaeda and its affiliates, including the 1998 attacks on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the 1999 attack on an apartment building in Moscow and the epochal 9/11 terrorist attacks (see Piazza, 2009).

The high frequency and intensity that characterises attacks by Islamist groups, especially al-Qaeda-affiliated groups like al-Shabab, may be explained in the light of interpretations of certain doctrine and practice within Islam, including the notion of the 'lesser jihad,' the practice of militant struggle to defend Islam from its enemies, or the Muslim reverence for 'Istishhad,' the practice of martyrdom (ibid: 66). Based on Piazza's article, it would also be about how al-Qaeda type groups fit a typology defined as 'universal/abstract' while other Islamist terrorist groups are more properly categorized as 'strategic' (ibid: 65). According to Piazza, '[t]he primary difference between universal/abstract groups and strategic groups is that the former are distinguished by highly ambitious, abstract, complex, and nebulous goals that are driven primarily by ideology… In contrast, strategic groups have much limited and discrete goals: the liberation of specific territory, the creation of an independent homeland for a specific ethnic group, or the overthrow of a specific government' (ibid).

In the next section, I provide a brief historical synopsis of al-Qaeda, as well as of its ideology, global aims, and tactics.

## Al-Qaeda's Global Jihadism

At the heart of the global jihadist campaign is the terrorist organisation al-Qaeda, 'a rather loose association of radical Salafist Islamist groups operating in many countries around the world that revere foundational members such as Saudi-born Osama Bin Laden, Egyptian-born Ayman al-Zawahiri, and the late Jordanian/Palestinian figure Abdullah Azzam and led by a transnational coterie of veterans of Islamist struggles around the world' (Piazza, 2009: 66). The organisation emerged from a network of Arab volunteers who in the 1980s fought in Afghanistan under the banner of Islam against Soviet Communism (BBC News, 20 July, 2004). The name 'al-Qaeda' itself

etymologically derives from an Arabic word for 'foundation' or 'basis.' Bin Laden explained the origin of the term in a videotaped interview with Al Jazeera journalist Tayseer Alouni in October 2001:

> The name 'al-Qaeda' was established long time ago by mere chance. The late Abu Ebeida El-Banashiri established the training camps for our mujahedeen against Russia's terrorism. We used to call the training camp al-Qaeda. The name stayed.
>
> - Transcripts of Bin Laden's October Interview,
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> CNN, February 5, 2002.

Al-Qaeda operated in Sudan in the early 1990s. In 1996, however, its headquarters and a dozen training camps moved to Afghanistan, where Bin Laden forged a close relationship with the Taliban (ibid). Characteristic techniques employed by al-Qaeda include suicide attacks and simultaneous bombings of different targets (Agbiboa, 2013b). Starting in late 2001 the US campaign against terror in Afghanistan dispersed the organisation and forced it underground as its personnel were attacked and its bases and training camps destroyed (Hoffman, 2006).

Al-Qaeda may be described as 'a quintessential universal/abstract terrorist movement' on account of its broad, ambitious, and highly ideological political agenda that includes (a) unifying the Islamic world under a puritanical interpretation of Sunni Islam, (b) the rejection of both secular rule and the institution of the nation-state in the Muslim world, leading to the overthrow of all existing Muslim countries and the integration of all Muslim societies into a Caliphate, (c) the liberation of Muslim territories from foreign occupation, and (d) the use of holy war (lesser jihad) to bind Muslims together and lead them through a 'clash of civilizations' that will rid the Muslim world of non-Muslim cultural and political influence (Piazza, 2009: 66). In a bid to build a coherent ideology that will unify Islamist terrorist groups around the world, al-Qaeda leaders drew from 'takfiri' thoughts, which justifies attacking corrupt regimes in Muslim lands, and from materials that not only stress the need for militant groups to unify, but also outline the Muslim requirement to target the

global enemy: in this case, the United States and the West (Benjamin, 2008). According to Farrall (2011: 132), 'the hybrid ideology and *manhaj* [programme] that emerged make little distinction between targeting local enemies and targeting global ones and have a one-size-fits-all solution—jihad.' As such, local groups joining al-Qaeda are required to broaden their focus, not abandon their own agenda. This helped assuage other groups' fears that merging with al-Qaeda would mean a loss of autonomy to pursue their own local goals. The development of a coherent ideology helped al-Qaeda acquire franchises which are crucial for demonstrating the organisation's power and attracting followers (Bergen et al., 2011; Agbiboa, 2013a).

The organisation founded a regional branch in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and acquired franchises in Iraq (AQI) and the Maghreb (AQIM), reinforcing al-Qaeda's ability to present itself as both the senior and most capable Islamist militant group. Even as they pursued local agendas, the franchises were required to undertake some attacks against Western interests, and leaders of groups joining al-Qaeda had to be willing to present a united front, stay on message, and be seen to fall under al-Qaeda's authority (Farrall, 2011). All al-Qaeda affiliated groups have attacked Western interests in their respective regions of operation. AQAP has been looking to expand its terrorist attacks beyond Yemen and Saudi Arabia, as demonstrated by the failed attempt to explode a bomb on a flight over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009 and, more recently, the foiled plot to bomb cargo planes in October 2010 (Bergen et al., 2011: 75). AQI was reportedly involved in the June 2007 London and Glasgow bomb plots (Farrall, 2011: 129). Already, we have highlighted al-Shabab's deadly attacks in Uganda and recently in Kenya (Raghavan 2010; Agbiboa, 2013a). The Taliban in Pakistan has begun to reach beyond Pakistan's borders to plot attacks in Europe and the United States (Bergen et al., 2011: 74). The Mumbai attacks of 2008 showed that Al-Qaeda's ideas about attacking Western targets had also spread to Pakistani militant groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, which in the past focused only on Indian targets (ibid).

But to what degree does al-Qaeda exercise command and control

over its expanded structure? Al-Qaeda is not a traditional hierarchical terrorist organisation and it does not exercise full command and control over its franchises. Nor is its role circumscribed to broad ideological influence. On account of its dispersed structure, Farrall (2011: 133) argues that 'al-Qaeda operates as a devolved network hierarchy in which levels of command authority are not always clear; personal ties between militants carry weight and, at times, transcend the command structure between core, branch, and franchises.' Unlike the tightly-knit groups of the past, such as the Red Brigades in Italy or the Abu Nidal group in the Middle East, 'al-Qaeda is loosely knit. It operates across continents as a chain of interlocking networks' (BBC, 20 July, 2004). As a result, uprooting the organisation in its entirety has been a 'highly complex and frustrating task' (ibid).

With a level of ideological sophistication and influence already established, al-Qaeda need only manage centralization on a broad level, which can be achieved through strategic leadership rather than day-to-day oversight (Agbiboa, 2013a). Al-Qaeda requires its subsidiaries like al-Shabab to seek approval from the central leadership before conducting attacks outside their assigned regions or assisting other Islamist groups with external operations (Farrall 2011; Bergen et al. 2011). These requirements have been emplaced to ensure that attacks by its franchises, like the recent Westgate attack, complement the organisation's strategic objectives, not undermine them. Thus, al-Qaeda's management philosophy has been described as 'centralisation of decision and decentralisation of execution' (Khalid, 2005).

## Conclusion

This article has observed that al-Shabab's deepening ties with the al-Qaeda organisation has transformed the jihadist group into a real transnational terrorist threat, with links across Africa and beyond. The article has further noted that the globalising nature of the modern world, particularly the ongoing ICT revolution, easily permits the spread of terrorism beyond localities, facilitating the transformation of domestic terrorism into transnational terrorism. As such, an effective response to terrorism today requires a coordinated

agenda that fuses domestic, regional and international strategies. Military crackdowns on Islamist groups in recent years – the Nigerian army on Boko Haram; the French on al-Qaeda-backed militants in Mali; AMISOM and the US military on al-Shabab – have aroused, rather than doused, Islamist terrorism in these countries. There is therefore a need for a non-killing strategy that seeks a better understanding of the underlying existential conditions and unifying ideologies that shape Islamist terrorist groups, like al-Shabab, who reject the prevailing order and opt for violence that aims for maximum casualties.

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