



Al Qa'ida in East Africa

Five months on, it is possible to look at the attack on the Westgate complex in Nairobi, which took place in September last year, with some perspective. The attack brings into relief the complex relationships between Al Qa'ida, Al Shabaab and other regional radical Islamist groups. It indicates that the defeat of Al Shabaab, if it were to happen, might not seriously dent Al Qa'ida's capacity in East Africa. In other words, regional powers and the West now have a bigger problem on their hands than simply the political and military defeat of Al Shabaab.

Although the Kenyan Government has been loath to admit it, Kenya has its own radical *jihadis* – this is a problem that has been growing in scope and seriousness for almost two decades.

While Muslim-Christian relations in Kenya have often been harmonious, there have been periods of intense confrontation. Just before independence, for instance, many Kenyan Somalis agitated for the merger of Kenya's Northern Frontier District into Somalia. Although the majority in the area favoured secession, Kenya ruled that the area would remain Kenyan. This led, after independence in 1963, to the 'Shifta War' – a series of armed irredentist insurrections which Kenyan security forces suppressed brutally. The state of emergency in the area lasted for 30 years.

Muslims make up about 11% of Kenya's population. After the Iranian revolution in 1979, Saudi and Gulf money largely displaced the *Shafi'i* school of religious thought, previously dominant in Kenya, with *Wahhabi* and Salafist thinking. Muslim youths, already alienated and marginalized in their own country, were easily exploited.

These days, around 40% of Mombasa's population is Muslim, and there is a growing radical Islamist presence in the city. At the same time, many people in the coastal zone - not just Muslims - feel marginalized socially, economically and politically, and there have been calls for the coast to secede from Kenya and become independent. There are concerns that radical Islamists may exploit the situation. Farther down the coast, in Zanzibar, a group called *Uamsho* (Awakening) is advocating greater observance of Islam and calling for independence for the semi-autonomous islands, part of Tanzania.

Only around 30% of Kenya's Muslims are of Somali origin – in other words, most Kenyan Muslims are not of Somali origin. It is worth analysing the evolution of Kenyan and Tanzanian involvement in terrorist attacks in East Africa. Al Qa'ida cells have been active in Kenya since the early 1990s. In the 1998 attacks on the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, the suicide bombers were Arab but many of the principal facilitators were Kenyan or Tanzanian. By 2002, when Al Qa'ida attacked the Israeli-owned Paradise Hotel in Mombasa, all involved – suicide bombers as well as facilitators – were Kenyan. Many of those involved in the July 2010 attacks in Kampala (on a restaurant and a rugby club) were Kenyan.

Al Shabaab has appointed Shaikh Ahmad Iman Ali, a Kenyan citizen, as its representative in Kenya. He is leader of *Al Hijra* (formerly known as the Muslim Youth Centre). *Al Hijra* has recently taken operational advice

and support from two experienced allegedly Al Qa'ida-linked figures – 'Makaburi' (Abu Bakr Sharif Ahmad) and Jermaine John Grant (a UK national now on trial in Mombasa).

In February 2012, the Muslim Youth Centre (MYC - before it became known as *Al Hijra*) stated that the official name of the union between al Shabaab, the MYC, and al Qa'ida is al Qa'ida East Africa. All the details of the Westgate operation are not yet clear, but it appears that two of the attackers were known members of *Al Hijra*¹.

Rather than viewing Westgate as an 'uniquely' Al Shabaab operation, therefore, it is probably more accurate to see it as an Al Qa'ida East Africa (AQEA) operation. Al Qa'ida has had a cell in the region since the early 1990s. AQEA can now officially join, as a 'fully blooded member', the other major Al Qa'ida affiliates, such as Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb and al Qa'ida in Iraq, all of whom have sworn allegiance to Ayman al Zawahiri, Usama bin Laden's successor.

Some analysts have seen the Westgate attack as a last desperate act by Al Shabaab. This seems unlikely. Al Shabaab, as a formed unit, has been pushed out of Mogadishu and Kismayo, although it still dominates much of central and southern Somalia. The African Union and Federal Somali Government's latest offensive (started in late 2013 and continuing in the first two months of 2014) has had no discernible strategic impact.

Al Shabaab's response has been tactically and strategically coherent and with an eye to the long term. It has avoided large-scale contact in Somalia and concentrated on conducting asymmetric attacks within

¹ Khattab al Kene and Umayr. See http://www.thestar.com/news/world/2013/10/05/kenyas_military_spokesman_confirms_names_of_westgate_attackers.html, for instance.

Somalia (the most recent of which were a complex attack on Villa Somalia,² the presidential and ministerial complex in Mogadishu, and a car bomb attack near the National Security and Intelligence Agency office³). This has destabilized the Somali government and exposed its inability to improve the security and livelihoods of ordinary people. Simultaneously al Shabaab has played a leading role in resurrecting Al Qa'ida East Africa, attacking from the rear the nations that confront it in Somalia (“the near enemy” in Islamist parlance), and effectively opening up a new front on the West (“the far enemy”).

The West and its East African allies may, to some extent, be putting the squeeze on Al Shabaab in Somalia. But, even if this lasts, it may prove a tactical victory at the expense of a strategic defeat.

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² 21 February 2014.

³ 27 February, also in Mogadishu.