

Al-Shabaab's Somali Safe Havens A Springboard for Terror

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## II. Policy Notes

### Al-Shabaab's Somali Safe Havens: A Springboard for Terror

by Josh Meservey

#### *Abstract*

*Al-Shabaab's recent terror attack on the Westgate mall in Nairobi is not, as some have argued, a sign of the group's desperation, but rather reveals its strength. Its most radical leader recently consolidated his control of the group, and the AMISOM offensive has stalled, ceding safe havens within the country that allow al-Shabaab to regroup and prosecute the insurgency it has launched. But the anti-Shabaab coalition has neither a sufficient number of troops nor the trained counterinsurgent forces required to root out the group. The coalition instead has to find a way for now to keep al-Shabaab off-balance in its sanctuaries, perhaps with elite unit and UAV strikes, while the international community trains adequate indigenous forces. The ultimate solution to the al-Shabaab challenge is the long-term project of building a legitimate Somali government; but in the meantime, Shabaab cannot be allowed to gather its strength to launch more attacks from its sanctuaries.*

**Keywords:** *al-Shabaab, Somalia, AMISOM, terrorist safe havens*

#### *Introduction*

The terrible tragedy at the Westgate mall in Nairobi, Kenya, is now ended. The final toll is still unclear, but at the time of this writing 72 people are confirmed dead, well over 150 injured, and more than 60 still missing.[1] Kenya and the other countries that lost citizens are now left to mourn, while their leaders face the task of preventing another such attack.

Analysts are still grappling with what this assault tells us about the Somali terrorist group, al-Shabaab, that claimed the attack. Ken Menkhaus, the eminent Somali expert, posted an article describing the attack as a sign of "desperation" by the group.[2] But others argued that the episode instead reveals al-Shabaab's strength, rather than a desperate bid to claw back some relevance.[3]

Those making the latter argument better capture the group's trajectory. It is true that the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) offensive in Somalia hurt al-Shabaab. The coalition's [4] capture of Kismayo and Mogadishu damaged the group's income as it is no longer able to rely on the taxes from Kismayo's port or Mogadishu's Bakara Market, making it difficult to provide the same sort of financial benefits to its fighters that induced many of them to join in the first place.[5] This and other factors have led to waves of defections.[6] Furthermore, al-Shabaab has lost much of the infrastructure it used for transmitting propaganda, such as several of its radio stations, another happy outcome of the coalition's

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offensive.[7] And while there are no solid numbers on just how many insurgents have been killed in the offensive, they are likely significant.[8]

The group also recently experienced an extraordinary spasm of internecine violence. In mid-June, Shabaab factions met in a series of clashes in southern Somalia;[9] after the dust settled, it was clear that the group's Emir, Ahmed Abdi Godane, had moved swiftly and with extraordinary ruthlessness against several challengers. His men killed at least two prominent leaders of the group, including a fellow founder. Another founder fled to the shelter of his clansmen, and the group's spiritual leader tried to defect to the Somali Federal Government (SFG) and was arrested.[10] A month later, Godane's men finally caught up with the group's most prominent foreign fighter, an American named Omar Hammami, and killed him as well. [11] Al-Shabaab was reeling.

But the purge also left Ahmed Abdi Godane, its most radical and ruthless leader, firmly in control of the group. Godane is a fanatic, a true believer in the worst excesses of the violent Islamic sub-sect known as Salafi-Jihad, and is committed to the idea of global war against any who do not agree with his narrowly defined beliefs. The Westgate slaughter was likely both a very public reminder of his new supremacy within the group to anyone who questioned it, as well as a signal of his willingness to prosecute jihad more vigorously in the region.

And while AMISOM made excellent progress against the group, their offensive is now stopped in its tracks. In June of this year, AMISOM switched to a "protection-of-civilians" strategy that consists of consolidating its gains and proactively protecting civilians under its control.[12] Protecting civilians is a critical piece of any counterinsurgency strategy, but AMISOM may also have calculated that pushing further into Shabaab-held territory would leave its troops stretched too thin to effectively hold the areas it has already liberated, opening up a dangerous opportunity for Shabaab.

That is why al-Shabaab's Westgate attack should be understood as a warning, rather than as a death rattle. The parts of Somalia out of which the group has yet to be pushed serve as safe havens where it is free to rest, regroup, and plan attacks in service of the insurgency it has launched against the SFG and its allies.

Safe havens are an obvious problem for counterinsurgents. Insurgents that have them have historically been far more difficult to defeat than those kept on the run: the Afghan Taliban's ability to safely ensconce itself in sanctuaries in Pakistan is one of the major reasons ISAF has struggled to bring order to Afghanistan, while the Viet Cong enjoyed the safety of Laos and Cambodia for most of the Vietnam War.[13] Fortunately, all of Somalia's neighbors are committed to defeating Shabaab and denying it a safe haven within their borders, but the group does not need to look that far afield for sanctuary; it has found it in the forbidding forests of Lower Jubba near the Kenyan border and the Galgala Mountains in the North.[14]

Counterinsurgency doctrine has much to say about how terrain and cover of the type found in those areas is highly appealing to insurgents looking for an area in which to hide and negate

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their foe's advantages in conventional weaponry. Gebru Tareke, a historian at Yale University who has studied the Ethiopian insurgencies, describes the "ideal terrain" for insurgents as an "expansive area of forests, marshes, or mountain ranges and gorges,"[15] another author speaks of "swamps, mountains, and forests,"[16] while the USMC *Small Wars Manual* warns that Marines should expect to battle insurgents in "mountainous, wooded terrain." [17]

A number of history's most infamous insurgencies have avoided destruction by retreating to mountain and forest redoubts. Since inception, the FARC has hidden in the thick jungles of Colombia,[18] and the Malayan Races Liberation Army was so adept at jungle warfare that in response the British began a school that became known as the Jungle Warfare School.[19] The Taliban escaped to the Tora Bora mountains from which it launched its insurgency,[20] while the Viet Cong hid so deeply in the jungle it was "virtually impossible" for the U.S. military to hunt them down, and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua survived the U.S.'s best efforts to eliminate them, in part because they made ample use of a mountain surrounded by jungle terrain.[21]

The forests of Lower Jubba are on par as an ideal safe haven with all of those examples. They have served as a traditional sanctuary for Somali extremists for nearly 20 years, and have been described as "a vast area of inaccessible jungles" and "remote bush." [22] These areas have already caused the coalition problems. The Kenyan Defence Force's (KDF) advance towards Kismayo was slowed when its mechanized units had trouble navigating the forests, while the Shabaab guerrillas made good use of the ample cover to avoid the KDF's superior firepower. [23]

Perhaps more concerning is the mountainous Galgala region of Puntland and its network of caves and training camps. The area is notoriously inaccessible and has explicitly been compared on more than one occasion to Afghanistan's Tora Bora mountains.[24] Stratfor released a report pointing out that the vegetation is so thick in the mountains, and the weather hot enough during the day, that fighters may be able to evade targeting systems from weapons platforms, including infrared targeting.[25] Its proximity to Yemen has in the past made it an ideal base from which to both send and receive weapons and fighters across the Gulf of Aden; reports of boatloads of fighters in that area, and of skiffs stuffed with weapons likely meant for al-Shabaab, suggests the group is utilizing this traditional smuggling route.[26]

Worse yet, a radical militia led by Yasin Kilwe operates in that area and hosts several hundred al-Shabaab fighters, including senior leaders.[27] The Puntland authorities have never been able to subdue Kilwe's group, and it has reportedly even captured parts of the Galgala region while also launching a deadly attack against a military base in Puntland. In February 2012, the militia formally joined al-Shabaab.[28]

These realities suggest that there is a critical need to keep pressing the attack against al-Shabaab and root it out of its sanctuaries, but also that it will not be easy. To begin with, more troops will be needed. A RAND study found that the average troop level during counterinsurgency campaigns in permissive environments was 2 soldiers per 1,000 residents, while for non-permissive environments it was 13 soldiers per 1,000 residents.[29] Somalia is

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only a permissive environment in certain places, so as a very conservative estimate, 7 soldiers for every 1,000 residents is necessary. The CIA estimates that the Somali population is currently about 10.2 million people; it is unclear if that number includes Somaliland's 3.5 million people,[30] but we will subtract that from the number as Somaliland generally does a good job of providing its own security. For 6.7 million people, then, the country requires about 47,000 troops.

As of June 2013, AMISOM was at full troop strength with just under 18,000 soldiers in the country,[31] though the African Union wishes to bump that number up to about 24,000.[32] Diplomats estimate that Ethiopia has about 8,000 soldiers inside Somalia, though no one knows the number for sure.[33] And it is difficult to determine how many troops currently serve in the Somali National Army; there are "theoretically" 10,000, though the likely number is far lower.[34] There are also a number of allied militias whose numbers are similarly vague: in early 2010, U.S. intelligence officials estimated Ras Kamboni had between 500 and 1,000 fighters, and in 2012 a Stanford University project estimated that Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama had around 2,000 fighters.[35] Numbers for the various other militias are even more difficult to find.

Whatever the actual force levels at the coalition's disposal, they are too few for AMISOM to continue its push against al-Shabaab. And in some ways the numbers are irrelevant as al-Shabaab is no longer interested in testing AMISOM in a conventional battle for superiority, as evidenced by the group's tactical decision over the last two years. When the KDF advanced into Kismayo in late 2012 it proceeded slowly, and its eventual final push featured a night-time amphibious assault spearheaded by Special Forces troops with Somali security forces bearing down from the interior.[36] But resistance was surprisingly light; al-Shabaab had abandoned the city, its final major stronghold and biggest source of funding, practically without offering serious resistance.[37]

Al-Shabaab's Kismayo withdrawal reflected the same decision the group made one year earlier in Mogadishu, suddenly withdrawing from a city for which it had battled for years.[38] Both choices were strategic decisions to avoid a devastating confrontation with a suddenly robust, reinvigorated AMISOM force that possessed far superior conventional military capabilities. After the fall of Kismayo, an al-Shabaab commander said as much: "We got orders from our superiors to withdraw from the city... this is part of broader military tactics we have set for the enemy." [39]

The "broader military tactics" to which the commander was alluding are guerrilla tactics. According to several reports, the group had been planning to switch to an insurgency strategy for more than a year at the time of the Kismayo withdrawal,[40] and abandoning fixed positions in the cities was in keeping with their new strategy. And it was not just the major cities that al-Shabaab abandoned; it declined to defend nearly all areas it held in the face of approaching troops.[41]

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An al-Shabaab commander, Sheikh Mohamed Ibrahim, articulated the strategy further when speaking of the group's withdrawal from Mogadishu: "Now we are saving money, while the enemy pays more and more to secure land it seized, recruit new soldiers, pay for services. Do you think really they can continue like that forever? Already we are in Mogadishu every night, carrying out attacks." [42] There is a self-serving element to his statement as al-Shabaab did not want to appear weak after its withdrawal from Mogadishu, but it is also an articulation of classic insurgency strategy. Ibrahim's words echo Robert Taber's arresting metaphor for an insurgent:

*The guerrilla fights the war of the flea. The flea bites, hops, and bites again, nimbly avoiding the foot that would crush him. He does not seek to kill his enemy at a blow, but to bleed him and feed on him, to plague and bedevil him, to keep him from resting and to destroy his nerve and morale.* [43]

There is a further complication for AMISOM. It takes forces trained in counterinsurgency and with a different mindset from the conventional warfighter's, a certain "flair for dealing with civilians," to be effective against an insurgency. [44] The U.S. Marine Corps believed so strongly in the necessity of training troops specifically for fighting insurgents that its *Small Wars Manual* devotes an entire chapter to the subject. [45]

Without such training, the results can be damaging indeed. The Nigerian army is currently having extreme difficulty suppressing Boko Haram in the northern parts of the country, in part because its soldiers are untrained in counterinsurgency tactics. [46] President George W. Bush's administration focused on building a U.S. force designed for conventional conflict, which left it ill-equipped to go about necessary counterinsurgency activities in Iraq and Afghanistan, and contributed to the Iraqi population turning against the American presence. [47] And in the war that haunts the United States still, Vietnam, part of the blame for the loss has been pinned on the fact that U.S. servicemen were untrained in counterinsurgency tactics. [48]

The bulk of the troops trying to suppress al-Shabaab have no training in the specific skill set necessary to succeed in this new tactical environment. Kenya's elite forces in Somalia, the Rangers and Special Forces, have had some counterinsurgency training from the British and Americans. [49] Yet the rest of Kenya's forces have not. In fact, one KDF soldier offered to a journalist the following worrisome analysis for fighting insurgents: "In guerrilla warfare you don't need training... You just need to know how to shoot and duck." [50] And one of Kenya's allies in the current fight, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, publicly questioned whether the Kenyan military was prepared for guerrilla fighting. [51]

The records of the other security forces that make up the coalition are mixed, but none are crack counterinsurgent forces. Ethiopia has fought a number of domestic guerrilla movements in its Oromia, Afar, and Ogaden regions, [52] but failed to quell the Shabaab-led insurgency

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that began in 2006 after the Ethiopian National Defense Force invaded the country, resulting in them ultimately being driven out.[53] The Ugandan army has experience fighting insurgents in the north of its own country, but its actions there have been stained by credible allegations of human rights abuses, and it remains feared and disliked by some Ugandans in those areas.[54]

And Somalia's national security forces have a whole host of problems that make them unsuitable for a counterinsurgency campaign, not least because they are largely composed of "groups of untrained young men" used to the power a weapon brings.[55] Many of these youths may well be proficient asymmetric fighters as Somalia has for decades been a harsh training ground in such types of combat. Yet they lack the necessary discipline and regard for the protection of civilians that is critical for successful counterinsurgency, and already have been credibly accused of a range of human rights' abuses.

Human Rights Watch has issued several reports that are cause for serious concern in this respect, including one in March 2013 concerning the plight of IDPs in Somalia:

*Members of displaced communities in Mogadishu faced serious human rights abuses including rape, beatings, ethnic discrimination, restricted access to food and shelter, restrictions on movement, and reprisals when they dared to protest their mistreatment. The most serious abuses were committed by various militias and security forces, often affiliated with the government.[56]*

The BBC documented abuse in IDP camps as well, reporting that 1,700 women were raped in 2012 in the camps, and quoted a U.N. estimate that "men in uniform" perpetrated 70% of the assaults.[57]

Human Rights Watch has also reported on "summary executions and torture" inflicted by pro-government militias in Beletwayne and Baidoa,[58] and in December 2012 urged Kenyan authorities not to repatriate Somali refugees to liberated areas because of "ongoing fighting and abuses against civilians in areas controlled by Kenyan forces and allied militias." [59]

Several cases of coalition abuse against civilians were egregious enough to spark an international outcry. One case, in January 2013, is particularly concerning as it suggests the government tried to cover up a crime committed by government security forces and then engaged in reprisals against those who reported the abuse. A woman who reported being raped by members of the Somali security forces was charged along with several others for "insulting a government body," among other charges.[60] The charges against her were eventually dropped, though the journalist involved in the case remained in jail for months afterwards.[61]

In April 2013, President Mohamud in a speech to police cadets in Mogadishu admitted for the first time that Somali security forces had engaged in rapes against civilians—he went on to say

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that security forces who rape and rob Somalis need to be fought the same as al-Shabaab.[62] It was an important and helpful step by the president, and will hopefully serve as a credible warning that mistreatment of civilians will not be tolerated. But the human rights abuses highlight the broader issues of poor discipline that make the Somali security forces thoroughly ill-equipped to help AMISOM dislodge al-Shabaab insurgents from its safe havens.

The international community is aware of the urgent need to train Somalia's indigenous security forces, and in fact have been working on it for years—Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, and the European Union have all spent time trying to whip various Somali National Army and militia forces into shape. But most of the training appears to be for fundamentals [63] and not the more sophisticated counterinsurgency training that is necessary. International donors are designating funds for police and other security force training,[64] which is positive, but much more will be required.

AMISOM and the SFG are thus caught on the horns of a nasty dilemma: allowing al-Shabaab to continue unmolested in its safe havens means the group will be able to continue to marshal its strength to fight its enemies, as well as plan the sorts of terror attacks it launched at Westgate. But restarting the offensive will leave AMISOM too thinly stretched in the areas it has already liberated. Furthermore, chasing Shabaab into the heavy forests of Lower Jubba, or the mountains of Galgala, will mean AMISOM's conventional military superiority will be largely neutralized, allowing Shabaab to fight on a more or less equal footing, a classic guerrilla strategy.

AMISOM needs, then, to find a way to keep the terrorists off-balance but avoid committing troops who are untrained for this sort of combat and who will get chewed up. It should conduct short, sharp strikes by Kenya's elite units who are trained in asymmetric warfare [65]—UAV strikes could also help, though the daunting terrain may make them less effective. Reliable and accurate intelligence will be critical, so AMISOM should be looking to its Somali counterparts to develop strong sources among the local communities. Meanwhile, the international community should redouble its efforts to train Somali security forces, as bringing in even more foreign troops to address the troop level shortfalls runs the risk of antagonizing Somalis.

Ultimately, the al-Shabaab problem is a political one that will require a political solution. Until there is a government in Somalia that can prove to Somalis it is their best hope for prosperity and stability, Shabaab will be able to garner some level of support from among the population, despite its general unpopularity. Yet building a state is a long-term project, and the immediate challenge of al-Shabaab's sanctuaries in Somalia remains, and it requires a smart counterinsurgency approach.

As U.S. Representative Tom Cotton recently remarked in a speech about al-Qaeda, "When you have to worry about personal security, you barely have time to plan a meal, much less plan and execute a mass attack." [66] Al-Shabaab, safe in its sanctuaries, had the time to plan a sophisticated and, by the evil metrics terrorists use, extraordinarily successful attack in

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Nairobi. AMISOM and the rest of the international community must devise a way to again pursue al-Shabaab, not only to give the SFG more time for state-building, but also to deny al-Shabaab the safe haven it needs to plot such horrors as we witnessed recently in Nairobi.

*About the Author:* Josh Meservey recently joined the Africa Center at the Atlantic Council as the Assistant Director. He is co-author, with James Forest and Graham Turbiville, of a monograph on the al-Shabaab insurgency to be published by the U.S. Joint Special Operations University. Sections of this article have been adapted from the forthcoming monograph.

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