

Statement before the House Foreign Affairs Committee

“AL SHABAAB: HOW GREAT A THREAT?”

A Statement by

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Statement for the Record

Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, and distinguished members of the committee, I thank you for the opportunity to testify on the threat posed by Al Shabaab. I will make some brief remarks about the evolution of this terrorist group, its current capabilities and objectives, and offer some thoughts on how its threat can best be dealt with by the United States and its allies in the East Africa region. With your permission, I will submit a longer written statement for the record.

Introduction

The gun attack and four-day siege which left at least 67 people dead at the Westgate shopping mall in Kenya's capital, Nairobi, has focused minds on the threat posed by the Somalia-based terrorist group, Al Shabaab. The group was quick to claim responsibility for the atrocity. In an audio message, its leader Ahmed Godane, said the motivation was to avenge Kenya for its invasion of southern Somalia in October 2011 and to put pressure on the Kenyan authorities to withdraw its troops, which remain in occupation of a large slice of Somalia's south-west, adjacent to Kenya's eastern border. If that was the objective, it appears to have backfired, at least for the time being. Kenyans have come together impressively in the days since the attack, from the long lines of volunteers giving blood to the wounded to the social media campaign organized on twitter under the hashtag, #WeAreOne. And while tough questions are being asked about the conduct of Kenya's security services before and during the attack, the government of Uhuru Kenyatta has vowed that its troops will not be deterred from their campaign in Somalia.

The evolution of Al Shabaab

Al Shabaab has undergone a steady evolution since it emerged as the extremist, armed wing of the Islamic Courts Union, a much broader based Islamist movement that established a modicum of security in parts of Somalia before it was swept aside by invading troops from Ethiopia—with tacit U.S. support—at the end of 2006. These events allowed Al Shabaab to present itself as a nationalist force bravely resisting aggression by Somalia's traditional enemy—Ethiopia—and vastly increased its support among ordinary Somalis, particularly as the occupation became prolonged and brutal. By the time the final Ethiopian troops withdrew in January 2009, Al Shabaab found itself in control of much of southern Somalia.

Faced with the challenge of governing territory for the first time, Al Shabaab quickly resorted to harsh and intolerant tactics. Music was banned, women forced to cover themselves, children forcibly recruited to its fighting brigades, and stonings and amputations meted out to those who transgressed its extreme interpretation of Sharia law. At the same time, Al Shabaab's resistance to the Western-backed Transitional Federal Government in Somalia's capital, Mogadishu, meant that no target was considered off limits. Revulsion at its tactics reached new heights when 19 of the country's brightest and best young people were blown up by a suicide bomber as a government minister addressed their graduation ceremony in December 2009. The nadir came in 2011 when famine befell areas of Somalia under Al Shabaab control because of the group's failure to respond to a chronic drought and its refusal to allow international humanitarian aid workers access to the needy. By the time the emergency was declared over, more than a quarter of a million people had died, half of them children under the age of six.

In the meantime, Al Shabaab was pushed back by the combined pressure of a domestic backlash and foreign intervention. Most notably Kenya, which resolved to take action. It has become exasperated by the permanent insecurity on its shared border, apprehensive about the implications for its tourist industry and for a major infrastructural program that would extend across the country's northern region, and alarmed by the steady stream of Somalis crossing into its territory to take up residence in the world's largest refugee camp, Dadaab. Nearly 2,500 Kenyan troops invaded southern Somalia in October 2011, eventually succeeding in pushing Al Shabaab back from the border and ousting the group from its main stronghold—and economic lifeline—the southern port city of Kismayo. Under pressure, in retreat, and cut off from lucrative port revenues, Al Shabaab shifted tactics and retreated into asymmetrical warfare.

Given this brutal history, how can we account for the residual appeal of Al Shabaab among some Somalis? The first thing to say is that the vast majority of Somalis revile the actions of this group. That said, Al Shabaab has had some success in presenting its activities as some kind of national resistance movement against what it sees as an illegitimate government in Mogadishu propped up by Western interests. The group has been adept at feeding off the internecine conflicts inherent in Somalia's clan structure, intervening in local level disputes and manipulating grievances to present itself as a force that champions the claims of citizens angry at their local, regional, or national governing authorities.

The Westgate attack, however, suggests that different interests are now driving Al Shabaab's activities. While certain members may have nominally espoused the language of nationalist resistance and others have jumped aboard in the hope of making money or at least getting a daily meal, a third group is clearly driven by a desire to advance the cause of international jihad. This final faction is now in control of the movement. It is led by Ahmed Godane, a 36 year-old from Somaliland and a veteran of jihadist campaigns in Afghanistan and Kashmir. It is Godane who pledged fealty to Al Qaeda at the beginning of 2010, formalizing the agreement in 2012, and who appears to have launched an internal purge of Al Shabaab members who reject his methods. Analysts have noted an exodus of foreign fighters from Al Shabaab in recent months, amid grumbles about Godane's leadership style. A succession of dissidents have been killed or gone missing. They include an Al Shabaab commander originally from Alabama, Abu Mansoor al-Amriki, who was killed last month along with a British member of the group. Meanwhile, the former spokesman of Al Shabaab, Sheikh Mukhtar Robow, has disappeared, and Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, considered the father of violent extremism in Somalia, has been detained by the authorities. Significantly, this purge appears to have brought Godane closer to some Kenya-based militants who may have provided assistance for the Westgate attack.

Current capabilities of Al Shabaab

What does the attack say about Al Shabaab, its current capabilities and its modus operandi? There has been a tendency in recent months to portray Al Shabaab as weak, fragmented, and under pressure. The Westgate attack does not necessarily contradict that analysis. After all, it does not require much beyond fanatical determination and good planning to attack a lightly-guarded suburban shopping mall full of families and children with guns and grenades. This was the ultimate soft target. The attack also follows a pattern of previous actions, both inside and outside Somalia, in which civilians have been

targeted. In 2010, Al Shabaab bombs killed 76 people in Uganda as they watched the soccer World Cup final at two bars in the capital, Kampala. The stated motive for the attack was also consistent with Westgate; the involvement of foreign troops in Somalia, this time Ugandan contributors to the African Union Mission in Somalia, AMISOM.

Furthermore, the Nairobi attack confirms the ascendancy within Al Shabaab of the hardcore internationalist wing aligned to Al Qaeda central that is committed to raising its profile and impressing its superiors with high-profile attacks on Western targets. This has regional implications given that this faction is more interested in looking beyond Somalia and cultivating links with terrorist outfits further afield. Groups in Kenya and Tanzania offer the most likely sources of support. Both countries have a small but growing problem with Islamist extremism, especially in the coastal regions and Zanzibar. In particular, investigators are examining the possibility that the Westgate mall attack was a collaborative effort between Al Shabaab and a Kenyan affiliate, Al Hijra. According to the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia, there has already been some transfer of personnel between the groups, with members of Al Hijra taking part in operations in Somalia before returning home in 2012.

This latest attack sounds a warning that further ‘spectaculars’ should not be discounted, given the apparent ease in which the Westgate operation was mounted. Al Shabaab appears to have settled on a frighteningly simple formula that takes a page from the playbook of Lashkar-e-Taiba, the terrorist group which staged a coordinated attack on Mumbai in 2008. This approach does not require high explosives and suicide bombs. All that is needed is a soft target, a few guns, plenty of ammunition, and some willing ‘martyrs.’ In the absence of good intelligence, there is little the authorities can do to prevent such atrocities. There are a multitude of potential targets and it is neither possible nor desirable to harden security at all of them to the extent that they could withstand an assault by determined attackers throwing hand grenades and firing guns.

Responding to the threat: Supporting Kenya

The United States has a close interest in ensuring that the perpetrators of the Westgate Center attack are held responsible. There are national security interests at stake, not least because of the ongoing speculation that some of those involved may have been U.S. citizens. For the time being, and unless such links are confirmed, the Westgate attack neither raises nor lowers the threat posed by Al Shabaab to the U.S. homeland. The ability of a terrorist group to attack a shopping center more than 7,000 miles from the United States does not shed much light on its capacity to do so closer to home.

Irrespective of the threat to the homeland, the United States has multiple, important interests in East Africa which must be protected from groups like Al Shabaab. Kenya has consistently been the United States’ strongest ally in East Africa. Nairobi is the economic hub of the entire region and a major contributor to the African growth story that is prompting the U.S. Government to engage more heavily in the continent. The United States has important business interests in Kenya, with IBM and GE among the corporate giants maintaining regional offices in the country. The U.S. embassy in Nairobi is its largest in Africa and the management headquarters for multi-billion dollar assistance programs covering the whole region. Moreover, the United States and Kenya are closely bound together by a shared exposure

to terrorism dating back to 1998, when Al Qaeda blew up the former U.S. embassy building in Nairobi, killing 218 people.

However, this latest attack comes at a time of strained bilateral relations. Kenya has already expressed its unhappiness with what it described as an “unfriendly” travel advisory issued by the State Department last Friday urging U.S. citizens in Nairobi and Mombasa to exercise caution. More broadly, bilateral relations have been unsteady by the election earlier this year of President Uhuru Kenyatta and his deputy, William Ruto, who face charges of crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court related to the outbreak of mass violence during and after the 2007 elections. Since the Westgate attack, President Kenyatta and others have argued that, at this time of crisis, the ICC trials will be a distraction with implications for national security. This presents the United States, which has urged Kenya to fully cooperate with the ICC, in an awkward position. However, the events of the past week do nothing to alter the seriousness of the charges faced by the president and his deputy, which deserve to be heard in full.

Political differences aside, Kenya is—and should continue to be—an important security partner of the United States. In addition to providing assistance to the investigation into the Westgate attack, the United States has committed more than \$90 million to building Kenya’s counter-terrorism capacity. But early inquiries into the attack have exposed serious intelligence failures—both among Kenya’s security services and by extension the main international counter-terrorism partners who support them—which underline the challenges of preventing such atrocities.

One acute shortcoming is the endemic corruption in Kenyan public life. Too many public officials are willing to turn a blind eye to criminal conduct in return for a bribe. Press reports in Kenya suggest that vital information which may have prevented the Westgate attack or led to the capture of some of the key organizers was missed in this way. The Kenya police, an institution which has successfully resisted multiple attempts at reform, is particularly culpable. A U.S. initiative to improve professional standards among the police could significantly enhance Kenya’s national security.

Beyond the formal security apparatus, the Westgate attack underlines the important role the public can play in being the “eyes and ears” of the authorities in preventing terrorism. However, the public will only develop a security consciousness if they trust their police or intelligence officials to act on the information they give them. Two communities that can play a particularly important role in offering information are Somalis living in Kenya and Kenyans of Somali origin. It is therefore particularly important that the Kenyan authorities do not punish these communities for the actions of a few by launching heavy-handed security actions, making arbitrary arrests, and expelling or threatening to expel refugees.

Responding to the threat: Supporting the Somali Federal Government

Ultimately, however, the key to defeating Al Shabaab will be found in Somalia, not Kenya. Al Shabaab is an outgrowth of more than 20 years of chronic disorder in Somalia, and at least another 20 of misrule before that. Efforts to strengthen the embryonic capacity of the Somali Federal Government (SFG) to restore security, stability, and consensual government to Somalia will be necessary initial steps toward

removing the conditions which allowed Al Shabaab to flourish. The SFG, with international support, has made modest progress since taking office one year ago. But it has many tasks to accomplish before its mandate expires in 2016, not least proving to a distrustful public that it is genuinely committed to governing in the interests of all Somalis.

The Westgate attack suggests that for now, Godane's fanatical wing of Al Shabaab is in the ascendancy. He and his acolytes must be found and detained before they can strike again. The U.S. should be extremely cautious in taking the lead in any operation to neutralize Godane. U.S. airstrikes against Al Shabaab leaders have been hugely controversial in the past and carry high potential for popular backlash, collateral damage, or unintended longer-term consequences. Instead, the U.S. should support regionally-led intelligence and surveillance efforts and utilize existing policy tools to encourage Godane's capture and prosecution, including the State Department's Rewards for Justice Program, which has a \$7 million reward on offer for information leading to his arrest.

In addition, the United States can continue to assist the African Union-led peacekeeping force which has put Al Shabaab on the back foot in recent months—and has in part prompted its resort to the asymmetrical tactics of bombings and hit-and-run attacks inside Somalia. The United States has been an important supporter of the AMISOM mission, which currently numbers approximately 17,700 troops from Uganda, Burundi, Kenya, Djibouti, and Sierra Leone, providing more than \$700 million since 2007. But AMISOM will not be in Somalia forever and is therefore no more than a temporary solution to the country's security problems. The Somali National Security Forces have a long way to go before they can be considered ready to meet the security needs of their citizens. They are under-resourced, under-equipped and ill-disciplined. The United States and other donors are trying to help by paying salaries and providing basic training to certain vetted units, but this effort will only bear fruit over the long term. In the meantime, constant vigilance will be required in order to ensure that human rights norms are respected.

It would be a mistake to think that a military solution alone will remove the scourge of Al Shabaab. Efforts must be intensified to track the money that sustains Al Shabaab operations. Current efforts by leading international banks to stop doing business with the money transfer companies through which some of this funding is believed to flow are understandable, but misguided, because they are likely to drive the remittance process underground and cause serious damage to the legitimate Somali economy.

More important than either security responses or financial transaction monitoring is the need for Somalia to pursue a political process to reach out to and potentially rehabilitate the broader swathe of Al Shabaab followers who are driven less by dreams of international jihad and more by the pursuit of local or national grievances or simply the next meal. There is scope, it seems, for the Somali Federal Government to negotiate with these people, and through a combination of threats and inducements persuade them to leave violence behind. It is not beyond the realms of possibility that the bulk of Al Shabaab could one day transition into formal politics. In its private conversations with the SFG, the United States should discreetly encourage this process.