



AUTHOR
Matt Bryden

The Reinvention of Al-Shabaab

A Strategy of Choice or Necessity?

FEBRUARY 2014

A Report of the CSIS Africa Program

CSIS

CENTER FOR STRATEGIC &
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

The Reinvention of Al-Shabaab

A Strategy of Choice or Necessity?

Author
Matt Bryden

A Report of the CSIS Africa Program

February 2014

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC &
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

About CSIS

For over 50 years, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) has worked to develop solutions to the world's greatest policy challenges. Today, CSIS scholars are providing strategic insights and bipartisan policy solutions to help decisionmakers chart a course toward a better world.

CSIS is a nonprofit organization headquartered in Washington, D.C. The Center's 220 full-time staff and large network of affiliated scholars conduct research and analysis and develop policy initiatives that look into the future and anticipate change.

Founded at the height of the Cold War by David M. Abshire and Admiral Arleigh Burke, CSIS was dedicated to finding ways to sustain American prominence and prosperity as a force for good in the world. Since 1962, CSIS has become one of the world's preeminent international institutions focused on defense and security; regional stability; and transnational challenges ranging from energy and climate to global health and economic integration.

Former U.S. senator Sam Nunn has chaired the CSIS Board of Trustees since 1999. Former deputy secretary of defense John J. Hamre became the Center's president and chief executive officer in 2000.

CSIS does not take specific policy positions; accordingly, all views expressed herein should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

© 2014 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.

Center for Strategic & International Studies
1616 Rhode Island Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036
202-887-0200 | www.csis.org

The Reinvention of Al-Shabaab

A Strategy of Choice or Necessity?

Matt Bryden

Introduction

The September 2013 attack on Nairobi's Westgate Shopping Center, which left more than 70 people dead, has positioned the Somali extremist group, Al-Shabaab, firmly in the global spotlight. While some observers have interpreted the attack as a sign of "desperation,"¹ others perceive it as an indication of Al-Shabaab's reformation and resurgence under the leadership of the movement's Amir, Ahmed Abdi aw Mohamud Godane.² The reality is, as usual, more complex. Westgate provided a glimpse of a movement in the throes of a protracted, fitful, and often-violent transition: Al-Shabaab is in the process of reinventing itself.

Al-Shabaab's steep decline in recent years has made radical reform a matter of survival. The jihadist movement has fallen far from its heady zenith in 2009–10, when it was without question the most powerful force in southern Somalia, controlling most major towns including much of the capital, Mogadishu, and earning tens of millions of dollars a year in tax revenues. Since then, Al-Shabaab has been steadily ceding territory—including its principal income-earner, the port of Kismayo—to the combined efforts of African Union troops, the Kenyan and Ethiopian armed forces, and their Somali allies. At the same time, the ranks of its leadership have been eroded by intelligence-led air strikes and commando operations.

For more than two years, between 2011 and 2013, wrangling within Al-Shabaab's top leadership over ideology, strategy, and tactics hindered any decisive action to reverse the movement's downward spiral. In June 2013, however, Godane finally succeeded in purging the movement of his most vociferous critics, leaving him—for the time being, at least—as Al-Shabaab's undisputed leader. The implications of Godane's coup, both for Al-Shabaab and for its adversaries, are beginning to take shape.

First, the question of Al-Shabaab's core ideological identity and affiliation appears to have been definitively settled. Within the strictures of its Salafi-jihadi orientation, Al-Shabaab's leadership was once relatively heterogeneous, including nationalist and politically pragmatic figures such as Hassan Dahir Aweys and Mukhtar Roobow. Internal debates within the leadership circles of Al-Shabaab raged over the value of a relationship with Al-Qaeda, the wisdom of attacks on civilians, and the role of foreign fighters within the organization. What now remains of Al-Shabaab is the more

¹ Andrew McGregor, "Hot Issue: Westgate Mall Attack Demonstrates al-Shabaab's Desperation, Not Strength," Jamestown Foundation, September 24, 2013, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Bwords%5D=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx_ttnews%5Bany_of_the_words%5D=westgate&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=41399&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=935464970e9996fd9a406a25f1f76ba3#.UujuZGTfquU.

² Also known as Mukhtar Abdirahman Abu Zubeyr.

extremist fringe: an Al-Qaeda franchise in Somalia, imbued with the “takfiri” ethos that legitimizes the killing of other Muslims, and a recommitment to the cause of international jihad and the restoration of an Islamic caliphate.

On the ground in Somalia, as a reinforced African Union peace support mission in Somalia (AMISOM) prepares to resume offensive operations, Al-Shabaab is likely to suffer military reverses—including the loss of its remaining strongholds. Whether by accident or by design, Godane’s reforms appear to have anticipated this development, preparing Al-Shabaab to withdraw in good order, preserving its forces for a long, asymmetrical struggle. For the near term at least, Al-Shabaab is not playing to win, but to survive, subvert, and surprise—to become, as T.E. Lawrence once described his irregular army during the Arab Revolt, “an influence, a thing invulnerable, intangible, without front or back, drifting about like a gas.”³ It is a strategy of necessity rather than of choice, but one that would permit Al-Shabaab to survive as a potent force in Somalia and the region.

From an international perspective, Al-Shabaab (and its affiliated networks, such as Kenya’s Al-Hijra) remains a persistent threat—especially to Somalia’s immediate neighbors and other troop-contributing countries (TCCs) to AMISOM. The loss of its remaining Somali safe havens will degrade the movement’s ability to plan and prepare major operations, but under Godane’s leadership, Al-Shabaab’s aspirational horizon will widen, rather than shrink, and it is plausible that Al-Shabaab will seek to expand its relationships with transnational jihadist groups.

Despite his apparent consolidation of power, Godane himself may be vulnerable. Even within his own faction of Al-Shabaab, tensions remain; and as the going gets tougher, he will have to work hard to persuade his remaining followers that the path he has chosen is the correct one. An even greater vulnerability, however, remains Al-Shabaab’s lack of popular support within Somalia. Most Somalis—including much of the country’s growing Salafi community—have been alienated by the movement’s draconian style of governance and its deliberate killing of civilians. By divesting his inner circle of its nationalists and political pragmatists, Godane’s purge has narrowed the group’s appeal even further and alienated many former sympathizers.

Al-Shabaab will soon face its greatest military challenge since the Ethiopian invasion of 2006. Godane’s coup has depleted its ranks, splintering the organization and leaving it more isolated than ever at a critical moment. At the same time, however, he has succeeded in restructuring what remains of Al-Shabaab to weather the coming AMISOM offensive and to retain to some degree the strategic initiative by engaging in asymmetrical warfare.

The AMISOM surge offers an opportunity to significantly disrupt and degrade Al-Shabaab’s capability to threaten Somalia and the region. But it requires that military operations be firmly anchored in a broader strategy that denies Al-Shabaab the opportunity to disengage and wage a successful asymmetrical campaign. In addition to AMISOM’s planned offensive, the group should be kept off balance with continued strikes to decapitate and degrade its leadership, including second- and third-tier players; and the administrations in Puntland and Somaliland should be encouraged to take coordinated measures to deny Al-Shabaab a safe haven in “Sharqistaan” as it

³ T.E. Lawrence, “The Evolution of a Revolt,” *Army Quarterly and Defence Journal* (October 1920).

vacates former bases in southern Somalia. Perhaps most importantly, however, will be the Somali federal government's (SFG) commitment to practice genuinely inclusive politics, disallowing Al-Shabaab the opportunity to entrench itself among disaffected clans and communities, and working with local partners to ensure security in newly recovered territories. Previous transitional Somali governments have neglected these responsibilities, permitting Al-Shabaab to recover from successive military defeats. It remains to be seen whether the current SFG leadership is capable of rising to the challenge.

Godane's Coup

Godane's 2013 purge was only the most recent—and probably most decisive—chapter in a long history of discord in the senior ranks of Al-Shabaab. Indeed, one of the movement's key strengths has long been its ability to manage divergence and disagreement between its competing factions, while remaining united and cohesive. That era of accommodation has now come to an end.

The first serious rifts in Al-Shabaab emerged following Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia in early 2007, when Al-Shabaab's "godfatherly" mentor and ideologue, Hassan Dahir Aweys, left Somalia for Eritrea to form the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS). Al-Shabaab commanders on the ground derided the ARS as being ideologically impure and militarily peripheral to the armed struggle inside Somalia, and would later accuse its leader, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, of selling out to the West. Two years later, Aweys sought to restore his credibility by returning to Somalia at the head of a loose jihadist alliance named Hisb'ul Islam, but this fractious marriage of convenience between disparate militias rapidly disintegrated, and in late 2010 Aweys's faction was forcibly disarmed and reabsorbed by Al-Shabaab.

Another key axis of division within Al-Shabaab opened in early 2009, when Godane and Mukhtar Roobow clashed over the capture of Baidoa. Roobow defied Godane's orders by granting several leading TFG politicians from his clan safe passage into exile, exhibiting a degree of political expediency that set the two leaders on a long-term collision course and foreshadowed the steady polarization of Al-Shabaab into two rival camps.

The Bifurcation of Al-Shabaab

In August 2011, under mounting pressure from AMISOM forces and their TFG allies, Al-Shabaab withdrew its forces from the Somali capital, Mogadishu. The withdrawal followed such persistent reports of a rift between Roobow and Godane that Roobow felt obliged to discredit them publicly.⁴ The retreat from the capital was a highly symbolic decision and an unacceptable humiliation for Godane as Al-Shabaab's Amir. Less than two weeks later, he replaced his two influential and independently minded deputies, Mukhtar Roobow and Ibrahim Haji Jaama' al-Afghani, with Mahad Warsame

⁴ "Roobow: Relationship with Al-Shabab Still Robust," October 9, 2010, <http://mogadishuman.wordpress.com/2010/10/09/roobow-relationship-with-al-shabab-still-robust/>.

Qaley Karatey, a staunch loyalist, and suspended meetings of Al-Shabaab's leadership council, the Shura.⁵

Godane's next move came in February 2012, with the announcement of a formal merger with Al-Qaeda—a proposition that had met with resistance within both organizations. Osama bin Laden himself had opposed the move, trying to persuade Godane that it would not be in Al-Shabaab's best interests. But bin Laden's successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in an apparent bid to assert his leadership vis-à-vis more vigorous Al-Qaeda chapters in Syria and Yemen, moved swiftly to approve Godane's request and announce the union. The alliance was of little tangible benefit to either party, but by symbolically strengthening Godane's hand, it helped to bring long-simmering differences within Al-Shabaab to a head, triggering public rifts between the group's senior leaders over strategy, tactics, and ideology.

In the months following the Al-Qaeda merger, Godane's determination to impose his will on Al-Shabaab met with growing resistance from other Al-Shabaab leaders, some of whom began agitating for a change of Amir. Godane's critics accused him of behaving like a dictator, and of embracing excessively violent methods. In March 2012, Omar Hammami, an American jihadist and close ally of Mukhtar Roobow, posted an online video claiming that his life was in danger because of divisions within the Al-Shabaab leadership.⁶

Godane was also apparently concerned by such rifts, fearing that a group of dissidents might break away from Al-Shabaab. In late March 2012 he issued a statement warning, "it is prohibited to form any group, party or armed or unarmed organisation in the jihadist al-Shabaab controlled areas because that is considered a means to divide, weaken and tear Muslims apart. Any group that tries to form a new coalition or a new party inside al-Shabaab is considered the enemy and should be fought."⁷

A week later, Hassan Dahir Aweys responded with a rhetorical broadside against Godane, accusing him of acts "far removed from Islam," including the killing of civilians in the name of religion.⁸

Discontent within Al-Shabaab was not limited to its Somali membership. Some *muhajiriin* (foreign fighters) were also disaffected with Godane's leadership. Before his death in a shootout at a government checkpoint in June 2011, Fazul Abdallah Mohamed had expressed his concerns in correspondence with Al-Qaeda's leadership, according to documents allegedly recovered from his laptop. Tensions between Fazul and Godane had become so pronounced that many observers suspected Godane of somehow engineering Fazul's death.⁹ In October 2012, Hammami confirmed that the concerns of the *muhajiriin* had yet to be addressed, issuing a new video message in

⁵ Voice of America Somali Service, "Godane oo Beddelay Ku-xigeennadiisii," August 26, 2011, <http://www.voasomali.com/content/hogaanka-al-shabab-oo--128511403/1251517.html>.

⁶ Bill Roggio, "Omar Hammami's personal dispute with Shabaab," *Long War Journal*, January 6, 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/01/analysis_omar_hammam.php.

⁷ Mahmoud Mohamed, "Somali observers: internal divisions widening within al-Shabaab," Sabahi Online, April 5, 2012, http://sabahionline.com/en_GB/articles/hoa/articles/features/2012/04/05/feature-01.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Somalia Report, "Al-Shabaab Leader Arranged Fazul's Death," June 16, 2011, http://www.somaliareport.com/index.php/post/973/Al-Shabaab_Leader_Arranged_Fazuls_Death.

which he claimed that “‘friction’ existed between Al-Shabaab and the foreign fighters.”¹⁰

Matters came to a head in early 2013, as some Al-Shabaab leaders began agitating for Godane’s removal, while others attempted reconciliation. In March, an Al-Shabaab figure known only by his *kunya*, Abu Zubeyr Al-Muhajir, issued an open letter in which he voiced his frustration with the failure of internal dialogue, and accused Godane of a litany of abuses.¹¹ This was followed several weeks later by the most serious challenge to Godane’s leadership, in early April 2013, when Ibrahim Haji Jaama’ Al-Afghani, one of Al-Shabaab’s founders and most senior leaders, published an open letter to Al-Qaeda’s Al-Zawahiri, reiterating many of Al-Muhajir’s accusations and warning that the Somali jihad risked failure.¹²

Al-Afghani was both a founder of Al-Shabaab and a longstanding friend and mentor to Godane. In Al-Afghani’s open defiance, Godane evidently detected a genuine threat to his own leadership. But curiously, the first public response to Al-Afghani’s letter came from Al-Shabaab’s Kenyan affiliate, the Muslim Youth Center (or MYC, now widely known as Al-Hijra), which described the letter’s content as “vile” and “crude,” accusing Al-Afghani of “fomenting dissent within Al-Shabaab.”¹³ MYC’s solidarity with Godane at this time of crisis may help to explain why the relationship between Al-Shabaab and Al-Hijra has remained solid, while other foreign jihadists have come to feel increasingly unwelcome.

The first open reaction from Godane himself was a public statement on June 17, in which he accused his critics of trying to set up a new faction of Al-Shabaab, as well as a number of serious crimes, including “dividing the Muslims...spreading false information that damages the unity of Al Shabaab...sharing Al Shabaab secrets with the enemies of Islam...shedding the blood of Mujaahideen (Al Shabaab fighters) [and] rejecting to appear in front of Al Shabaab Court.”¹⁴

Three days later, on June 20, 2013, Godane’s loyalists moved decisively against dissident Al-Shabaab leaders in the town of Baraawe. Ibrahim Al-Afghani and Ma’alim Burhan were both killed, while other “pragmatists” fled for their own safety. Hassan Dahir Aweys traveled by boat to central Somalia, where he surrendered himself to local authorities and was subsequently rendered into the custody of the Somali government. Aweys accused Godane of dissolving the Shura and acting like a dictator.¹⁵ Roobow established himself in his home region of Bakool, while the whereabouts of other Shabaab pragmatists are uncertain.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Sabahi Online, “Open letter to al-Shabaab leader reveals: ‘Yes, there are problems,’” April 30, 2013, http://sabahionline.com/en_GB/articles/hoa/articles/features/2013/04/30/feature-02.

¹² Hassan M. Abukar, “The Letters: How Al-Qaeda Failed in Mali and Somalia,” *Wardheer News*, April 18, 2013, <http://www.wardheernews.com/the-letters-how-al-qaeda-failed-in-mali-and-somalia/>.

¹³ MYC Press Office, “Press Release: Statement on Attributed Letter by Sheikh Al-Afghani to Amir Sheikh Ayman Al-Zawahiri,” April 9, 2013, <http://somalisecuritystudies.blogspot.de/2013/04/press-release-statement-on-attributed.html>.

¹⁴ Garowe Online, “Somalia: Al Shabaab dispute turns violent, factions emerge,” June 21, 2013, http://www.garoweonline.com/artman2/publish/Somalia_27/Somalia_Al_Shabaab_dispute_turns_violent_factions_emerge_printer.shtml.

¹⁵ Ibid.

The success of Godane’s coup was the result of careful planning and patient preparation. Anticipating a leadership struggle, Godane had been steadily shifting power away from the Shura—where his rivals also sat—and into the hands of regional governors and commanders whom he considered loyal. At the same time, he had been building up Al-Shabaab’s intelligence wing, the *Amniyaad*, into a sort of “praetorian guard,” answerable directly to him, responsible for identifying internal threats, and enforcing loyalty to his leadership. And as Al-Shabaab adapts its military strategy to an increasingly asymmetrical battlefield, the *Amniyaad*—and its martyrdom operations in particular—have become increasingly central to its war effort, especially in Mogadishu

Al-Shabaab is also likely to find itself increasingly isolated among the Somali population. Godane’s purge has robbed Al-Shabaab of some of its most prominent, respected, and effective leaders—some of whom enjoyed considerable leverage within clan constituencies to enlist support for Al-Shabaab’s needs. By redefining Al-Shabaab as synonymous with its extremist fringe and the terrorist tactics it embraces, Godane has alienated sympathizers among the broader Somali Salafi community who had aligned their supporters through reference to other aspects of the group’s ideology and leadership.

Al-Shabaab “Rebalances” Its Military Strategy

Al-Shabaab is likely to face significantly greater military pressure in 2014 than it did in 2013. The decision of the UN Security Council to augment AMISOM to over 22,000 troops with an explicit mandate to resume offensive operations, and the military means to do so, is already beginning to shape the battlefield on the ground. Since late 2013, AMISOM has begun to maneuver more aggressively in central Somalia, threatening Al-Shabaab strongholds in Buulobarde and ‘Eel Buur.

Most of the new AMISOM troops—approximately 4,000—are to be contributed by Ethiopia, which officially joined the mission on January 22, 2014. Since Ethiopian forces were already on the ground in several regions of Somalia, the numerical “uplift” this provides may be less impressive than it appears. But with this newfound international legitimacy and financial backing for its military presence, Ethiopia is likely to act more assertively, and has offered to provide leadership for the training of Somalia’s national security forces.

Fears that Ethiopian military involvement in Somalia could stir nationalist resentment and revive Al-Shabaab’s fortunes, as it has in the past, are largely misplaced. Unlike 2006, when Ethiopian forces last entered Somalia on a large scale, they are neither imposing an unpopular leader nor confronting an enemy that enjoys widespread popular support. Ethiopian policy is closely aligned with the aspirations of many Somalis—notably supporters of the Interim Juba Authority, Puntland, and Somaliland—and Addis Ababa is currently one of the closest allies of the Somali federal government, offering political, diplomatic, and military support. Moreover, most Somalis are tired of Al-Shabaab’s excesses and abuses, and would welcome external support, even from Ethiopia, in installing a benign alternative.

Jaysh al-Usra

Al-Shabaab's military organization, which it refers to as *Jaysh al-Usra* (the Army of Hardship), includes five major formations (often referred to as “brigades”):

- *Abu Dalha Al-Sudaani*: Lower and Middle Jubba
- *Sa'ad Bin Mu'aad*: Gedo
- *Saalah Nabhaan*: Bay and Bakool
- *Ali Bin Abu Daalib*: Banaadir, Lower Shabelle, and Middle Shabelle
- *Khaalid Bin Waliid*: Hiiraan, Mudug, and Galgaduud
- *Liwaa'ul Qudus*: “Sharqistaan” (eastern Sanaag and Bari regions)

Each formation is affiliated with political and administrative entities known as the “Islamic governorates” (*Wilaayadka Islaamiga*): a decentralized arrangement that is well suited to guerrilla warfare, and which distributes much of the burden of resource management to the local level. However, the loss of Al-Shabaab's remaining southern strongholds, and with them some of the main internal lines of communication, will present new challenges to the movement in terms of command and control, logistics, and finances.

With its infantry forces operating mainly in rural areas and generally avoiding major engagements with AMISOM and SFG forces, Al-Shabaab has come to rely heavily on the *Amniyaad* to maintain a presence in Mogadishu and other major towns, and to demonstrate the organization's continuing ability to fight. The *Amniyaad*'s most common tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) include targeted killings, lobbing of grenades, and use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). But the *Amniyaad* is also responsible for the planning and conduct of “martyrdom” operations—a key feature in Al-Shabaab's strategy to wage asymmetrical warfare, and its most likely response to AMISOM's anticipated surge.

“Martyrdom” Operations

The evolution of Al-Shabaab's martyrdom operations has been a long, uneven process of trial and error, driven in large part by skills imported from terrorist groups and war zones elsewhere in the world. Since its first, clumsy suicide bombing in 2006, the proficiency and sophistication of Al-Shabaab's martyrdom operations have advanced considerably; the most recent stage in this evolution has been the use of “complex” or “hybrid” attacks, involving both suicide bombers and suicide infantry.

Since at least 2010, Al-Shabaab has operated across Somalia's borders, staging as many as 30 attacks in Kenya alone.¹⁶ The vast majority of these incidents involved

¹⁶ Kenya National Assembly, *Report of the Joint Committee on Administration and National Security; and Defence and Foreign Relations on the Inquiry into the Westgate Terrorist Attack, and Other Terrorist Attacks in Mandera in Northeastern and Kilifi in the Coastal Region*, December 2013, 12–15. Some of these incidents have been identified as the work of Al-Shabaab's Kenyan affiliate, Al-Hijra.

grenades, landmines, or IEDs, many of which passed virtually unnoticed. The two most dramatic and devastating international attacks perpetrated by Al-Shabaab were both martyrdom operations: the July 2010 Kampala bombings and the September 2013 attack on Nairobi's Westgate Mall. These two "signature" attacks offer important insights into the evolution of Al-Shabaab's Martyrdom Brigade and development of its TTPs.

Kampala, 2010

On July 11, 2010, Al-Shabaab conducted its first major operation outside Somalia—multiple, near-simultaneous bombings at nightclubs in Kampala, Uganda, where crowds of football fans had gathered to watch the World Cup. The three explosions, just seven minutes apart, killed over 70 people. A fourth bomb left at a discotheque failed to detonate. Al-Shabaab subsequently claimed responsibility for the operation, which represented a lethal combination of TTPs that the group had tried and tested inside Somalia, prior to their export to Uganda.¹⁷

Al-Shabaab's adoption of suicide bombing as a tactic dates from 2006, when the group unsuccessfully tried to assassinate then-president of the TFG Abdillahi Yusuf Ahmed with a crude vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) in the southern town of Baidoa. In October 2008, the group successfully executed its first multiple-VBIED operation with near-simultaneous bombings against three targets in Hargeysa (Somaliland) and two in Boosaaso (Puntland).

Al-Shabaab successfully piloted the use of explosive vests in two sophisticated attacks against African Union military bases in the capital, Mogadishu, in February and September 2009. Both operations employed a combination of person-borne improvised explosive devices (PBIEDs) and VBIEDs, followed by indirect fire.¹⁸ In a September 17 attack against AMISOM Force Headquarters, two VBIEDs penetrated the security perimeter and exploded, killing 17 peacekeepers, including the deputy force commander. Two attackers wearing explosive vests dismounted from VBIEDs at the last moment, but were killed before they could enter the building and detonate their bombs. The explosives in these vests were wired to mobile phones serving as a "failsafe" means of remote detonation in case the bomber failed to trigger the blast himself: the first recorded—albeit unsuccessful—use by Al-Shabaab of the PBIED "chicken switch."

The July 11, 2010, operation in Kampala brought together several of these elements in a unique combination: near-simultaneous attacks against multiple targets, employing three vest-fitted explosives with failsafe devices as well as a remotely detonated IED, employing a mobile phone as a trigger.

¹⁷ Al Jazeera, "Arrests made over Uganda bombings," July 13, 2010, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2010/07/201071362446995742.html>.

¹⁸ M. Bryden, A. Laloum, and J. Roofthoof, *Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia pursuant to Security Council resolution 1853 (2008)*, UN Security Council document S/2010/91, March 10, 2010, 51.

Westgate, 2013

In late September 2013, a small team of gunmen attacked the upscale Westgate Shopping Center in the Westlands area of Nairobi, Kenya. Using small arms and grenades, the attackers killed at least 67 people, including six Kenyan security personnel, and wounded more than 200 others, before being brought under control by Kenyan security services toward the end of the first day. Poor coordination and indiscipline on the Kenyan side contributed to the operation becoming a drawn-out siege lasting nearly four days, during which much of the mall was looted, parts burned, and a section of the structure collapsed.

Kenyan authorities have identified four terrorists involved in the attack. One, Hassan Abdi Dhuhulow, was a Norwegian citizen of Somali origin. The remaining three attackers were reportedly Somali nationals. All four terrorists are believed to have been killed fighting the Kenyan security forces. Although some observers have attributed the Westgate attack to a group of Al-Shabaab dissidents with Al-Qaeda linkages,¹⁹ Godane himself reportedly claimed responsibility for the attack on behalf of Al-Shabaab.²⁰ Questions still remain, however, as to the precise chain of command and organization of the attack, including the extent of support from external networks in Kenya.

Like the Kampala attacks three years earlier, the Westgate operation represented an innovative combination of TTPs rehearsed by Al-Shabaab in Somalia. In contrast with the Kampala attack, however, the Westgate operation highlighted Al-Shabaab's growing reliance on "suicide infantry" rather than suicide bombers.

Al-Shabaab first started experimenting "complex" attacks involving both suicide bombers and lightly armed infantry in 2009, when the tactic was employed with limited success in the September 17 attack against AMISOM Force Headquarters (see above). But the "infantry" in this case were carrying PBIEDs rather than assault rifles.

A second complex operation targeted the Muna Hotel in Mogadishu in August 2010, where Al-Shabaab gunmen dressed as government security personnel stormed the building and engaged in a two-hour gun battle before at least one of the assailants detonated an explosive vest. Thirty-two people were reported killed in the attack, including several members of parliament.

Despite the apparent success of the attack, which was claimed by Al-Shabaab spokesman Ali Mohamud Raghe,²¹ the movement did not attempt another complex operation for more than two years. The next occurred in late 2012, when the movement mounted an unsuccessful assault on Mogadishu's Jazeera Hotel in an apparent attempt to kill Somalia's newly elected president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud,

¹⁹ See, for example, Clint Watts, "Was Kenya Westgate Attack More AQAP/AQ Central than Shabaab?" *Selected Wisdom*, October 7, 2013, <http://selectedwisdom.com/?p=1164>.

²⁰ David Trifunov, "Al Shabaab leader Ahmed Godane claims responsibility for Westgate mall attack," *Global Post*, September 25, 2013, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/africa/kenya/130925/al-shabaab-ahmed-godane-claims-responsibility-kenya-mall-attack>.

²¹ Mohamed Olad Hassan and Malkhadir M. Muhumed, "Somalia Suicide Bomber, Gunmen Attack Muna Hotel, 32 Killed," *Huffington Post*, August 24, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/08/24/somalia-suicide-bomber-gu_n_692270.html.

and other senior government officials. Hotel guards, reinforced by Somali and AMISOM security forces, succeeded in foiling the attack.

Up to this point, a common feature of Al-Shabaab’s “martyrdom” operations had been the suicide bomber as the centerpiece of the attack; infantry, when employed, had generally played a supporting role, breaching the security perimeter and ensuring the bombers reached their objective. In the aftermath of the failed Jazeera operation, Al-Shabaab modified this formula, using suicide bombers to breach security perimeters and sow confusion, while fighters equipped with small arms and grenades—sometimes also wearing explosive vests—were responsible for most of the killing.

These refined TTPs were employed to devastating effect in 2013, first against the Supreme Court and then again against the United Nations offices in Mogadishu. The April 14 attack on the Supreme Court employed a VBIED to breach the main entrance, through which a small team of gunmen, some of whom were also wearing explosive vests, entered the complex to carry out a killing spree.²² As many as 35 people, including all of the attackers, were reportedly killed in the operation,²³ which Al-Shabaab attributed to its Martyrdom Brigade.²⁴

The June 19, 2013, attack on the United Nations followed a similar pattern, with a VBIED exploding outside the main gate of the compound in the late morning, allowing a small team of gunmen to enter.²⁵ Twenty-two people were reported killed in the attack, including four UN international personnel, four local security guards, and all of the attackers.²⁶ Once again, Al-Shabaab attributed the operation to the Martyrdom Brigade.²⁷

The Westgate attack was therefore building on TTPs that had been successfully tried and tested in Somalia earlier the same year—with one important innovation: the substitution of hand grenades for suicide bombers to breach the external security perimeter. This was apparently a pragmatic decision, based on the disruption of several previous attempts to deploy PBIEDs against targets in Nairobi, but it also represented the crossing of a conceptual threshold that simplifies the planning and logistics of suicide operations, potentially reducing the risk of detection and disruption. Al-Shabaab should therefore be expected to consider incorporating this

²² Abdi Guled, “16 Killed in Attack on Somali Supreme Court,” AP, April 14, 2013, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/gunmen-attack-mogadishu-court-complex-witnesses>; Sabahi Online, “Mogadishu attack an ‘act of desperation’ for al-Shabaab,” April 15, 2013, http://sabahionline.com/en_GB/articles/hoa/articles/features/2013/04/15/feature-01.

²³ Michelle Shephard, “Probe focuses on Canadian as Shabab leader of Somalia courthouse attack,” *Star*, April 15, 2013, http://www.thestar.com/news/world/2013/04/15/somalia_courthouse_attack_toll_rises_to_35.html.

²⁴ Press Service of Harakat Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen, “Somalia Mujahideen kill 27 apostate militants in Mogadishu,” April 14, 2013, http://www.kavkaznews.com/eng/content/2013/04/14/17645_print.html.

²⁵ Sabahi Online, “Al-Shabaab suicide unit attacks UN compound in Mogadishu,” June 19, 2013, http://sabahionline.com/en_GB/articles/hoa/articles/features/2013/06/19/feature-01.

²⁶ One of the victims was a UN employee; three others were employees of a security company under contract with the United Nations. See http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/al_shabaab.html and <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/19/us-somalia-blast-idUSBRE95I0AJ20130619>.

²⁷ HSM Press, “Somali Mujahideen units from Martyrdom Brigade stormed UNDP in Mogadishu,” June 19, 2013, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2013/06/19/17927.shtml>; see also Mike Pflanz, “Al Qaeda-allied suicide team blasts UN compound in Mogadishu,” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 19, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2013/0619/Al-Qaeda-allied-suicide-team-blasts-UN-compound-in-Mogadishu>.

technique in future attacks. Similarly, the subsequent use of a laptop computer as an IED in an attack on a popular Mogadishu restaurant in November 2013 represents another innovation in TTPs that probably foreshadows future Al-Shabaab attacks.²⁸

Al-Shabaab's Options: Strategic Withdrawal or Defeat?

The resumption of AMISOM offensive operations will bring to an end a long respite for Al-Shabaab. In the coming months, the movement will likely be forced to abandon the few major towns it still controls in southern Somalia, being steadily deprived of redoubts from which to plan and prepare operations, and risk losing the strategic initiative that it has enjoyed for almost two years.

Godane's restructuring of the organization seems to anticipate such challenges, streamlining its ranks while devolving greater command and control to trusted regional commanders. The *Amniyaad* has been developing the experience and skills necessary to wage a long campaign of assassination, intimidation, and terrorist attacks behind enemy lines—especially in the major towns. By aligning Al-Shabaab more closely with Al-Qaeda, Godane has tried to boost his group's international profile and linkages, hoping to create opportunities for his fighters to train abroad and gain battlefield experience in foreign conflicts.

In sum, Godane seems to be preparing Al-Shabaab for a strategic withdrawal, preserving his forces and their ability to fight. Whether or not he is able to do so, rather than being forced into headlong retreat or even a rout, now depends on the actions of his adversaries.

Territorial Presence

Since at least 2010, Al-Shabaab has considered shifting its center of gravity northward, away from AMISOM's area of operations. The movement has been preparing for this contingency for several years, establishing an enclave in the highlands of the eastern Golis range that Al-Shabaab refers to as "Sharqistaan," or the "Golis Islamic Governorate."²⁹ But continuing pressure from Puntland and Somaliland security forces, and the potential dilution of support among the Salafi business community in Bosaaso, have gradually been transforming Sharqistaan into a less permissive environment for Al-Shabaab. If this trend continues, the group's leadership core will have to seek alternatives, including a possible migration to Yemen in partnership with AQAP.³⁰

Al-Shabaab should also be expected to maintain a presence in southern Somalia. In rural areas, the group will continue to exploit inter-clan tensions and local grievances in order to retain spaces in which it can operate, while obtaining local recruits and resources. Its fighters will act as "force multipliers" for the clan militias to whom they

²⁸ See AP, "Mogadishu Suicide Attack: Heavy Casualties Feared after Bombing at Hotel Makkah in Somalia's Capital," *Huffington Post*, November 8, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/08/mogadishu-suicide-attack_n_4241126.html.

²⁹ See, for example, <http://calamada.com/?p=5515>.

³⁰ Canadian Security Intelligence Service, *The Future of Al Qaeda: Results of a Foresight Project*, World Watch: Expert Notes Series publication No. 2013-05-01, 60, https://www.csis-scrs.gc.ca/pblctns/cdmctrch/20130401_th_ftr_f_lgd-eng.asp.

lend support—especially where those militias are actively opposed to the SFG or its allies.

TTPs

In January 2014, Al-Shabaab conducted relatively large-scale raids on SFG garrisons in Jannale and Mahadaay, while apparently seeking to avoid contact with AMISOM forces. Whether or not this augurs a resumption of widespread guerrilla warfare is unclear, but it does demonstrate that Al-Shabaab remains prepared to move against remote or vulnerable SFG garrisons.³¹

In urban areas, Al-Shabaab should be expected to maintain support networks and operational cells in order to retain the capacity to undertake targeted killings and terrorist attacks. Some of these networks enjoy the tacit support of government officials and members of parliament, making it extremely difficult for the government to ensure security.

Moreover, the persistence of insecurity in Mogadishu and other major towns not only serves a strategic military purpose for Al-Shabaab; it also permits the group to continue to extort payments from the Somali business community in exchange for protection. Unless and until the SFG and its allies are able to provide genuine security, Al-Shabaab “taxation” is likely to remain a major source of revenue for the militants, even in areas nominally under government control.

Lastly, there should be no doubt that Al-Shabaab, or other jihadist elements in the Horn region that are aligned with the group, will retain the desire and the capability to strike soft, unsuspecting targets outside Somalia. Recent boasts by the long-serving Al-Shabaab leader, Fu’aad Shangole (himself a former resident of Sweden), that his movement will take the battle to Washington and New York,³² is very likely hyperbole; however, the number of Al-Shabaab recruits from Western countries, as well as potential “lone wolf” extremists sympathetic to Al-Shabaab, raises the persistent threat of returning extremists engaging in acts of violence back home.³³

A more realistic appreciation of Al-Shabaab’s capabilities suggests that Somalia’s neighbors and AMISOM troop-contributing countries (TCCs) currently face a more serious and imminent threat than their Western partners. Al-Shabaab has successfully attacked Kenya and Uganda, and Ethiopia has accused Al-Shabaab of being behind a failed attempt to bomb Addis Ababa stadium during a qualifying match for the

³¹ See, for example, the Caasimada News Network, <http://caasimadanews.com/2014/01/05/qarax-khasaare-geystay-oo-ka-dhacay-deegaanka-jannaale-ee-gobolka-shabeellaha-hoose/>; Radio Alfurqaan, <http://radioalfurqaan.com/?p=10632>; and Midnimo, <http://www.midnimo.com/2014/01/17/dhageyso-shabaabka-oo-khasaaro-badan-ka-geestay-degmada-mahaday/>.

³² Caasimado, <http://caasimada.com/fuaad-shangole-jihaadka-ilaa-uganda-new-york-iyo-washington-ayaan-wadeenaa/>.

³³ For example, Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale, who were convicted for the murder of the British soldier, Drummer Lee Rigby, in London in May 2013. Adebolajo had previously been arrested in November 2010 near the Kenya-Somalia border, on suspicion of trying to join Al-Shabaab. See, for example, Associated Press, “Lee Rigby’s killers convicted in the U.K. serviceman’s murder,” CBC News, December 20, 2013, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/lee-rigby-s-killers-convicted-in-the-u-k-serviceman-s-murder-1.2469961>.

football World Cup.³⁴ Kenya remains particularly vulnerable to Al-Shabaab, given the existence of a domestic jihadist affiliate, Al-Hijra, and the significant number of Kenyan fighters still in Al-Shabaab's ranks.

The resumption of AMISOM offensive operations offers an opportunity to disrupt Al-Shabaab's planning and to degrade its capacity to operate both inside and outside Somalia. But in order for such gains to be sustained, military operations must be situated in the context of a broader, multifaceted strategy. SFG political engagement is needed across southern Somalia in order to deny Al-Shabaab local support and to dismantle its "governorates" and their forces. Somaliland, Puntland, and the Juba Interim Authority must also be enlisted in this effort, to ensure that Al-Shabaab is not simply displaced from one part of Somalia to another; and coordinated intelligence operations between Somalia's neighbors and international partners will be needed to ensure that Al-Shabaab's foreign fighters do not disperse undetected across Somalia's borders to expand the frontiers of their "jihad."

About the Author

Matt Bryden is director of Sahan Research, a think tank located in Nairobi, Kenya. Previously, he served as coordinator of the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea (2008–2012), as director for the Horn of Africa at the International Crisis Group (2004–2006), and as coordinator of the Somali Programme at Interpeace (1996–2002). Mr. Bryden is a graduate of McGill University. He is the editor of *Rebuilding Somaliland: Issues and Possibilities* (Red Sea Press, 2005) and of *Rebuilding Somalia: Issues and Possibilities for Puntland* (Haan Publishing, 2001).

³⁴ Tesfa-Alem Tekle, "Ethiopia: Al-Shabaab behind Plot to Bomb Stadium, Says Ethiopia," *Sudan Tribune*, December 25, 2013, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201312260009.html>; William Davison, "Somalis Killed in Explosion Targeted Soccer Match, Ethiopia Says," *Bloomberg News*, October 15, 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-10-15/somalis-killed-in-explosion-targeted-soccer-match-ethiopia-says.html>.

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC &
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

1616 Rhode Island Avenue NW | Washington, DC 20036
t. 202.887.0200 | f. 202.775.3199 | www.csis.org

Cover photo: ABDIRASHID ABDULLE ABIKAR/AFP/Getty Images.