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*The Westgate Terrorist Attack and
the Transformation of Al-Shabab:
A Global Jihadist Perspective*

David Davies Memorial Institute
of International Studies

Daniel E. Agbiboa, University of Oxford, United Kingdom
Email: daniel.agbiboa@qeh.ox.ac.uk

Daniel E. Agbiboa is a Queen Elizabeth House (QEH) Doctoral Scholar in the Department of International Development, University of Oxford, United Kingdom.

This is a working paper based on theoretically-informed empirical research on the recent Westgate attack in Kenya for which Al-Shabab, the Somali-based and Al-Qaeda-linked Islamist terrorist organisation, has since claimed responsibility. It presents research that accounts for the transformation of Al-Shabab from a mainly nationalist organisation with a localised agenda into a movement that conducts the kind of coordinated and sophisticated attacks recently witnessed at the Westgate Mall in Kenya's capital Nairobi, building upon previously published work by the author. The argument presented is that to understand the transformation of Al-Shabab, one has to consider how the group came to be incorporated within a global jihadist movement by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Comments and responses are welcomed by the author in contributing to ongoing research in this area.

ABSTRACT

On 21 September 2013 Kenya recorded its deadliest terrorist incident since the 1998 bombing of the US embassy in Nairobi. Over 90 people lost their lives when a group of masked gunmen stormed Kenya's high-end Westgate mall in Nairobi and randomly opened fire on weekend shoppers. Al-Shabab, a Somali-based Islamist group, has since claimed responsibility for the horrific attack. Who is Al-Shabab? Why did the group rebel? Why Kenya? How does one explain the transformation of Al-Shabab from a mainly nationalist organisation with a localised agenda into a movement that conducts the kind of coordinated and sophisticated attacks recently witnessed at the Westgate mall? Drawing on three key hypothesis on religious terrorism, and on James Piazza's distinction between 'universal/abstract' groups and 'strategic' groups, this article will argue that to understand the transformation of Al-Shabab, one has to consider how the group came to be incorporated within a global jihadist movement by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Furthermore, the article will argue that the Westgate attack corroborates Al-Shabab's willingness and increased operational capability to hurt targets outside its traditional Somalian base. This suggests that the group is moving away from insurgent activity in Somalia itself and has mutated as a transnational terrorist group, with grave implications for international security and regional stability.

Key words: Al-Shabab, Westgate Attack; Al-Qaeda; Global Jihad; Kenya; Somalia.

Introduction

On 21 September 2013 Kenya recorded its deadliest terrorist incident since the 1998 Al-Qaeda bombing of the US embassy in Nairobi. At least 70 people were confirmed dead, 175 others reported injured, and several others held hostage, when a group of Islamists fighters stormed Kenya's high-end Westgate mall in Nairobi and randomly opened fire on weekend shoppers. The Islamist fighters reportedly shouted in the local Swahili that Muslims would be allowed to leave while all others were subjected to their bloodletting. At least 18 foreigners were killed in the horrific attack, including citizens from Britain, France, Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Australia, Peru, India, Ghana, South Africa, and China (Mamdani, 2013; Agbiboa, 2013). The Somali-based Islamist group Harakat Al-Shabab al-Mujahideen (aka Al-Shabab, aka the youth, aka mujahidin Al-Shabab Movement, aka Mujahideen Youth Movement, aka Hizbul Shabaab, aka Hisb'ul Shabaab, aka Youth Wing) have claimed responsibility for the attack through its now closed Twitter account.

In one tweet, Al-Shabab announced: 'The Mujahideen entered #Westgate Mall today at around noon and are still inside the mall, fighting the #Kenyan Kuffar inside their own turf.' In another tweet they stated their refusal to negotiate and later on said, 'For long we have waged war against the Kenyans in our land, now its time to shift the battleground and take the war to their land' (Edmund and Richard, 2013). Al-Shabab has recently released the names and nationalities of the Islamist fighters who attacked the Westgate mall in Nairobi (see Table 1). In an interview with Al Jazeera, a spokesman for Al-Shabab stated that the Westgate mall was chosen as the central target because it is frequented by Kenyan elites, diplomats, and tourists, specifically Americans and Israelis (Blanchard, 2013).

The above tweets suggest that Al-Shabab's Westgate attack was retribution for the invasion of Somalia by Kenyan Defence Forces (KDF) – labelled as an 'occupation force' by Al-Shabab – in October 2011 following attacks by alleged Al-Shabab fighters in northern Kenya near the Somali border (Joselow, 2011). Kenya's

operations resulted in Al-Shabab's loss of the strategic seaport of Kismayo, from which it had derived substantial revenues through the international charcoal trade (Blanchard 2013). In July 2012, the KDF in southern Somalia, numbering about 4,000, were incorporated into the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) force of over 17,000 soldiers with a UN mandate to protect the weak Transitional Federal Government (TFG). As Table 2 shows, Kenya is among the five troop contributing countries (TCCs) to the AMISOM that since 2011 has forced Al-Shabab to retreat from Somalia's capital, Mogadishu, as well as 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).

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).

Apart from Kenya's political and military support for the TFG, there are also a number of political reasons why Kenya was Al-Shabab's primary target. This includes '[Kenya's] support for US backed counter-terrorism efforts [especially since the bombing of the US embassy in the country as well as in Tanzania in 1998] that especially target Somalis and Somalia, and the perception that the country is a Christian state [and] a frontline state against the spread of Islamist extremism in the Horn of Africa' (Mwangi, 2012: 521). In addition, Al-Shabab claims, not without reason, that Kenya has been involved in the recruitment and training of Kenya Somali and Somali youths on behalf of the TFG and its army. Indeed, the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia pointed out that Kenya has failed to meet its obligations under the UN resolution 1772(2007) regarding the disclosure of support to Somalia's security sector. The Kenyan government itself

have publicly acknowledged that it accepted TFG's request to train government police officers, but initially denied knowledge of any other type of training (Mwangi, 2012: 521).

Like Kenya, another country under serious threat from Al-Shabab is Djibouti because of its active role in the AMISOM. The Obama-led administration has been strengthening the TFG by providing money for weapons and helping the military in Djibouti train Somali troops (US Government, 2010: 13). From 2007 through 2013, the US allocated roughly $512 million in support of AMISOM, in addition to assessed contributions for the UN logistics support package for AMISOM. During the same period, America allocated more than $170 million to support the Somali National Army to counter Al-Shabab more effectively (US Department of State, October 8, 2013). America's active funding of, and support for, AMISOM and the TCCs inevitably puts her and Al-Shabab at daggers drawn. Al-Shabab has repeatedly warned all TCCs to stop their support for AMISOM or face the group's wrath as Kenya and Uganda have already done (Onuoha 2013).

How does one explain the transformation of Al-Shabab from a mainly nationalist organisation with a localised agenda into a movement that conducts the kind of coordinated and devastating terrorist attacks witnessed at the Westgate mall in Nairobi? This article sets out to explore the evolution, transformation and links of the Somali-based Islamist terrorist group, Al-Shabab. The article argues that to understand the transformation of Al-Shabab, one has to consider how the group came to be incorporated within a transnational jihadist movement by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. The article further argues that the Westgate attack and other atrocities attest to Al-Shabab's deepening ties with Al-Qaeda and its subsequent increased operational capability to hurt targets outside its established Somalian base. This suggests that the group is moving away from insurgent activity in Somalia itself and has mutated into a transnational terrorist organisation, with grave implications for regional stability and international security.

The article begins by discussing the nexus between religion and terrorism through the prism of three key hypotheses gleaned from existing literature. Thereafter, it examines the emergence, efficacy and reach of Al-Shabab, especially how the group's deepening ties with Al-Qaeda has transformed it into one that perpetrates the kind of attack recently witnessed at the Westgate mall in Kenya. The article then provides a brief explanation of the main objectives and unifying Ideology of Al-Qaeda's global jihadist campaign, as well as expectations from Islamist groups, like Al-Shabab, that claim loyalty to the Al-Qaeda terrorist organisation. The conclusion summarises the key arguments of the article and outlines key knowledge requirements for more effective anti-terrorism measures.

Religious Terrorism: A Conceptual Synopsis

The nexus between religion and terrorism has a long genealogy in Western scholarship. The concept of 'religious terrorism' goes back to David Rapoport's 1984 paper analysing the use of terror in the three monotheistic religions. This seminal paper inspired many similar works on terrorism which sought to explain why violence and religion has re-emerged so dramatically at this moment in history and why they have so frequently been found in combination (Juergensmeyer 2003: 121). As Scott Appleby's (2001: 7) classic work in the field begins: 'Why does religion seem to need violence, and violence religion?' In this strand of literature, religious terrorism has been raised above a simple label to a set of descriptive characteristics and substantive claims which appear to delineate it as a special 'type' of political violence, fundamentally

different to secular terrorism (Hoffman 2006: 88; Agbiboa, 2013b). The claim about the special nature of religious terrorism rests on three key hypotheses (see Figure 1) briefly discussed below.
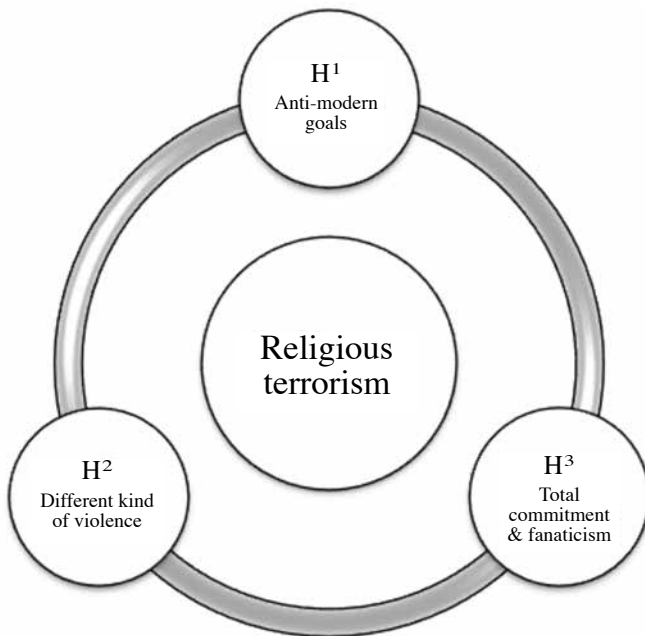

Figure 1: Three Hypotheses (H) of Religious Terrorism

The first hypothesis states that religious terrorists have anti-modern goals of returning society to an idealised version of the past and are therefore necessarily anti-democratic and anti-progressive (Juergensmeyer 2003). Audrey Cronin (2003: 38), for example, argues that 'the forces of history seem to be driving international terrorism back to a much earlier time, with echoes of the behaviour of "sacred" terrorists... clearly apparent in the terrorist organisation such as Al-Qaeda.' It is further argued that religious terrorists have objectives that are absolutist, inflexible, unrealistic, devoid of political pragmatism and hostile to negotiation (Gunning and Jackson, 2011). Matthew Morgan (2004: 30) puts it tersely: 'Today's terrorists don't want a seat at the table; they want to destroy the table and everyone sitting at it.' Regarding the Al-Qaeda terrorist organisation, Daniel Byman (2003: 147) argues: 'Because of the scope of its grievances, its broader agenda of rectifying humiliation and a poisoned worldview that glorifies jihad as a solution, appeasing Al-Qaeda is difficult in theory and impossible in practice.' Similarly, Daniel Benjamin (2008: 2) contends that unlike most terrorist groups, Al-Qaeda 'eschews incremental gains and seeks no part of a negotiation process; it seeks to achieve its primary ends through violence.'

The second hypothesis states that religious terrorists employ a different kind of violence compared to secular terrorists. Bruce Hoffman (2006: 88), for example, argues that for the religious terrorist, 'violence is... a sacramental act or divine duty executed in direct response to some theological demand,' as opposed to a tactical means to a political end. Besides, some scholars have suggested that because religious terrorists have transcendental aims, are engaged in a cosmic war and lack an earthly constituency, they are not constrained in their pedagogy of violence and take an apocalyptic view of violent confrontation (Berman and Laitin 2005). In this regard, Juergensmeyer (2003: 149-150) argues that 'What makes religious violence particularly savage and relentless is that its perpetrators have placed such religious images of divine struggle – cosmic war – in the service of worldly political battles.' For this reason, acts of religious terror serve not only as tactics in a political struggle, but also as evocations of a much larger spiritual confrontation. Thus, religious terrorists aim for maximum casualties and are willing to use weapons of mass destruction. As Magnus Ranstorp (1996: 54) puts it, they are 'relatively unconstrained in the lethality and the indiscriminate nature of violence used...'

Added to this, many scholars of terrorism generally point to four fundamental qualities that make religiously-oriented terrorist groups more prone to adopt tactics calculated to result in high casualty rates:

(a) 'religious terrorist groups are driven by deep-set cultural identities and a desire to demonstrate cultural dignity in the face of an adversary that represents an alien and, to the terrorists, objectionable way of life' (Piazza, 2009: 64); (b) compared to secular terrorist groups that commit acts to generate sympathy with their cause locally or internationally, religious terrorists do not necessarily crave popular approval for their acts because they expect instead to obtain spiritual reward, making them even less inhibited when it comes to committing acts likely to yield high casualty rates (Enders and Sandler, 2000: 307-332); (c) religious terrorists declare war on entire societies, cultures, and political status-quos, not just on individual governments as is the case with secular terrorist groups (*ibid*); (d) religious terrorists tend to see violence as an end unto itself rather than a means to an end (Piazza, 2009). For them violence is a 'purifying act,' a means of communication and a public demonstration of their fervour, drive and determination and sincere adherence to their ideology. This explains why extreme tactics such as suicide attacks are more common among religious terrorists vis-à-vis secular terrorists (Hoffman and McCormick 2004: 243-281; Agbiboa, 2013c, 2013d).

The third, and final, hypothesis states that religious terrorists have the capacity to evoke total commitment and fanaticism from their members. It is argued that religious terrorists are characterised by the suspension of doubt and an end-justifies-the-means worldview – in contrast to the supposedly more measured attitudes of secular groups (Gunning and Jackson 2011). Juergensmeyer (2003: 220) argues that 'these disturbing displays have been accompanied by strong claims of moral justification and an enduring absolutism, characterised by the intensity of the religious activists' commitment.' Moreover, it is suggested that in some cases the certainties of the religious viewpoint and the promises of the next world are key motivating factors in driving insecure, alienated and marginalised youths to join religious terrorist groups as a means of psychological empowerment. It is further argued that such impressionable, alienated and disempowered young people are vulnerable to forms of brainwashing and undue influence by recruiters, extremist preachers or internet materials (Hoffman, 2006: 197-228). Romero (2007: 445), for example, argues that Islamist terrorist connections can provide 'social backing, meaning to life (to compensate for the spiritual emptiness felt), and a social or collective identity mainly based on the pride of forming part of the jihad as the only way of reaching the power and glory of Islam.'

It is instructive to note that the seismic rise of radical Islamist terrorism starting in the 1980s and 1990s has significantly contributed to the lethality of attacks perpetrated by religious terrorist groups (Rapoport, 1998; Juergensmeyer 1997; Agbiboa, 2013b). Available empirical data shows that over the period 1968 to 2005, Islamists groups were responsible for 93.6 percent of all terrorist attacks, and 86.9 percent of all casualties inflicted, by religiously-oriented terrorist groups (Terrorism Knowledge Base (www.tkb.org)). Piazza (2009: 66) explains the higher frequency and intensity of terrorist activity among radical Islamists in the light of the (mis)interpretation of certain doctrine and practice within Islam, including the concept of 'lesser jihad,' the practice of militant struggle to defend Islam from its perceived enemies, or the Muslim reverence for 'Istishhad,' the practice of martyrdom. 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). For 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). From this perspective, Islamist groups like Al-Shabab, Al-Qaeda, and Boko Haram, among others, fall into the universal/abstract category on account of their global jihadist ideological stance against outposts of the West and perceived or real enemies of Islam. It is important to note that when examined in the aggregate, Al-Qaeda affiliated groups perpetrate more lethal attacks and are responsible for a disproportionate number of attacks and total casualties per group than any other religious oriented terrorist group (Piazza 2009: 66). This finding is consistent with empirical studies by Asal and Blum (2005: 153-155) that shows a non-random clustering of high-causality attacks perpetrated by Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, specifically the 1998 attacks on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the 1999 attack on a Moscow apartment building, and the 9/11 attacks. According to Fergusson (2013), no Al-Qaeda-linked Islamist group is more organised and deadlier than Somalia's Al-Shabab.

The Emergence and Transformation of Al-Shabab

Since the fall of the military dictator Mohammed Siad Barre in January 1991, the Somalian state has not had an effective central government and its people have known the ravages of hunger and perpetual anarchy.[1] According to Wise (2011: 2), '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.' The ongoing feudal struggles and civil discord that followed the end of Barre's government precipitated a major humanitarian crisis, creating a massive Somali diaspora. The deepening crisis resulted in the arrival of a UN Peacekeeping Mission which operated in Somalia from 1992, as well as the arrival of the US military – 'Operations Restore Hope' – in a bid to protect food packages from warlords. 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 (Agbiboa, 2013).

The most significant effort to resolve 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 election, Yusuf appealed to the international community 'to stand by us and help us disarm our militias' (Agbiboa 2013a). The TFG was formed with a five-year mandate to establish permanent, representative government institutions and organise national elections (US Department of State, May 24, 2012). Backed by Ethiopia, the TFG moved into the southcentral Somali town of Baidoa in February 2006 but failed to stem the tide of clan politics or to stamp its authority beyond Baidoa. In June 2006, a militia group known as the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) seized control of the Somali capital Mogadishu, promising to bring order and an Islamic state. At the request of the TFG on 20 July 2006, the US-backed Ethiopian troops invaded Somalia with the goal of dispersing the ICU and installing the TFG in Mogadishu (Wise, 2011). Lorenzo et al. (2010: 220) argues that Ethiopia's invasion was interpreted as 'a humiliation from both a nationalist and Islamist perspective. Many Somalis perceived Ethiopia as acting as a proxy for the US, and America's involvement was itself widely seen as a

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1   However, it should be noted that some semblance of order was provided during the 2000s by the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), formed from 11 autonomous courts. The ICU fought robbery, drugs, banned films they deemed inappropriate, and tackled major crimes in north Mogadishu. In December 2006, the ICU was ousted, following the invasion of Ethiopia. By January 2007, the ICU was effectively dismembered by the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) (see Roggio, 2007).

desire to avenge the 1993 "Black Hawk" incident or as part of a larger plan to attack Muslim countries.' Thus, a 'complex cocktail of nationalist, Islamist, anti-Ethiopian, anti-American, anti-Western, anti-foreigner sentiments' became a trademark of Somalis at home and abroad (Lorenzo et al. 2010: 220).

It was against this backdrop that Al-Shabab was formed as a radical offshoot of the ICU, which, in 2006, controlled Mogadishu (Fergusson, 2013). The Islamist group, which controls about half of south-central Somalia, is estimated to have between 7,000 to 9,000 fighters, mainly recruited within Somalia but also from Western countries (see Table 1). According to the UN Information Service, Al-Shabab continues to draw support from roughly 300 foreign fighters (not of Somali descent) mainly from Kenya, Sudan, and Yemen, but also from Bangladesh, Chechnya, and Pakistan, as well as from Europe, Australia, Canada, and the United States (Kay, 2013). US African Command officials note that these foreign fighters 'remain the greatest threat to Western interests regionally and internationally' (Rodriguez 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 an Islamic state (Wise, 2011: 3). In 2000, AIAI remnants – mostly young members – reformed into Al-Shabab and were incorporated into the ICU as its radical youth militia (Ibid). The group operates as a decentralised organisation with formal structures which are meant to provide the movement with a legitimate leadership structure and predictable decision-making processes (Mwangi, 2012: 519). The structure of Al-Shabab follows a pyramidal, three-layered superstructure: 'the *Qiyadahi* (the top leadership), the *Muhaajirrum* (the foreign fighters and Somalis with foreign passports) and the *Ansar* (the local Somali fighters)' (Mwangi, 2012: 519). By ideology, Al-Shabab has been labelled by many observers as *Wahhabist* because of the extreme Islamism it advocates (Ibrahim, 2010: 9). In terms of funding, Al-Shabab generates revenues from various local and international sources, including 'duties and fees levied at airports and seaports, taxes in kind on domestic produce, "jihad contributions," checkpoints and various forms of extortions justified in terms of religious obligation, or *zakat*' (Mwangi 2012: 519). However, Al-Shabab's main source of external funds remains Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.

The Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in December 2006 marked a watershed in the transformation, legitimation 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), as well as to legitimize its existence by discrediting the TFG and external actors like Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti and AMISOM, and also to mobilise public support for its armed rebellion, especially jihad (Mwangi, 2012: 520). Consequently, 'Al-Shabab emerged as the main source of armed resistance to the Ethiopian occupation and combined its jihadist rhetoric with Somali nationalism and anti-Ethiopian sentiment to win both passive and active support from many Somalis, including those who had been wary of its extremist Islamism' (ibid; see also, Menkahus, 2009: 4-5). 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 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 curb 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). In January 2009, Ethiopia withdrew its troops from Somalia, replaced by the AMISOM comprising thousands of Ugandan and Burundian peacekeeping forces (see Table 1).

Since 2008, Al-Shabab has demonstrated that it has the operational capability to launch deadly attacks against outposts of the West and perceived enemies outside Somalia. In October 2008, Al-Shabab coordinated five suicide bomb attacks that hit the UN Development Programme compound, the Ethiopian consulate and various government offices, killing several dozen (Ali Noor, 2008). In September 2009, Al-Qaeda bombed the African Union peacekeeping mission in Mogadishu, killing more than 20 people and damaging the offices of a US firm that was purportedly providing support to peacekeepers (Agbiboa, 2013b). In July, 11, 2010, Al-Shabab claimed responsibility for suicide bombing of two groups of fans watching the World Cup in the Ugandan capital, Kampala, which killed more than 70 people, including one American citizen. The Ugandan attacks, according to Al-Shabab, were launched to punish the country for its active role in assisting AMISOM forces in Somalia, in the same way that the recent Westgate attack was launched to punish Kenya for its military operations in Somalia since August 2011 (Agbiboa, 2013; Onuoha, 2013).

The argument that this article makes is that to understand the transformation of Al-Shabab, one has to consider how the group came to be incorporated within a global jihadist movement led by Al-Qaeda.

Forging ties between Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabab

Al-Qaeda operated in Sudan in the early 1990s hosted by the Islamist regimes of Omar al Bashir and Hassan al Turabi (Lorenzo et al. 2010: 218). However, the organisation soon set its sights on war-torn Somalia when it learnt that American troops were going to be deployed into it in order to restore order and provide supplies to the local population. Addressing a core group of Al-Qaeda members in late 1993, Bin Laden declared: 'The American army now they came [sic] to the Horn of Africa, and we have to stop the head of the snake... the snake is America, and we have to stop them. We have to cut the head and stop them' (cited in Lorenzo et al. 2010: 218). Following discussions between Al-Qaeda's military wing commander Abu Hafs al Masri and AIAI's military wing commander Shaykh Hassan Awey's, four Al-Qaeda instructors were sent to Somalia to 'train other Somalis' linked to the AIAI in advanced combat tactics and weapons. According to the Al-Shabab Media Foundation, Al-Qaeda's official propaganda wing, these instructors taught Somali Islamists 'the tactics of guerrilla warfare, in addition to taking part in a number of combat operations against the Americans' (Lorenzo et al. 2010: 218).

The relationship between Al-Qaeda and the AIAI leadership continued after the US withdrew from Somalia. In 1996, Al-Qaeda moved its base to the Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, where Bin Laden forged a close relationship with the Taliban (CNN, February 5, 2002). A number of key members of the AIAI leadership travelled with Al-Qaeda to Afghanistan to receive training in Al-Qaeda's combat strategy, including suicide attacks and simultaneous bombings of different targets. One of them was Aden Hashi Farah Ayrow, a senior AIAI military commander. Propaganda materials released by Al-Shabab suggest that Ayrow grew 'fond of the way Al-Qaeda worked and admired its doctrine, its strategy to change the Islamic world, and its call for jihad

against Christians. Ayrow met many mujahedeen brothers in various positions within the organisation, and he also met Shaykh Usama Bin Laden, may Allah preserve him' (Lorenzo et al. 2010: 219). The report further noted that at the end of this first tour of Afghanistan, Ayro had become 'a military encyclopaedia – he was unparalleled in the Horn of Africa region... He took Shaykh Usama's advice and returned to Somalia in order to spread the idea of global jihad and the path of Al-Qaeda – confronting the Christian world' (Ibid). Starting in late 2001 the US war on terror in Afghanistan dispersed the organisation and forced it underground as its personnel were attacked and its bases and training camps destroyed (Hoffman, 2006).

Since 2008, Al-Shabab has transformed itself 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 jihad against the West (Wise, 2011). On several occasions leaders of Al-Shabab have pledged the group's allegiance to Al-Qaeda. Muktar Robow, for example, stated that 'Al-Qaeda is the mother of the holy war in Somalia... We are negotiating how we can unite into one... We will take our orders from Sheikh Osama bin Laden because we are his students' (Fletcher, 2008). Similarly, a January 2010 communiqué by Al-Shabab stated that the 'Jihad of Horn of Africa must be combined with the international jihad led by the Al-Qaeda network' (BBC, February 1, 2010).

Al-Shabab's deepening ties with Al-Qaeda, especially since 2009, has had profound effects on its structure, targets, and operational strategy. First, Al-Shabab's affiliation with Al-Qaeda significantly altered its leadership component. After 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 forces. However, the group's increasing ties with Al-Qaeda has led it down the path of suicide attacks as a means of achieving its objectives; the group has claimed responsibility for several bombings – including suicide attacks – in central and northern Somalia and in Mogadishu (Agbiboa, 2013a). Reflecting a shift largely driven by its growing friendship with Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabab has emphasized the development of training camps for suicide bombers across Somalia and beyond (Wise, 2011). In fact, 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, 2013c, 2013d). 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. He also alleged that both jihadist groups shared training and fighters with Boko Haram. He described that 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).

In September 2009, Al-Shabab officially pledged its allegiance to Bin Laden's Al-Qaeda (Agbiboa, 2013a). In February 2012, Al-Shabab's emir in Somalia, and Al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, released a joint video to formally announce a merger of the two organisations. The merger has predictably worried the United States, which, already, on 18 March 2008 designated the Al-Shabab as a 'Foreign Terrorist Organisation under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (as amended) and as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist under Section 1(b) of Executive Order 13224 (as amended). The consequences of these designations include a prohibition against the provision of material support or resources to Al-Shabab and blocking of all property and interests in property of the organisation that are in the United

States, or come within the United States, or the control of U.S. persons' (US Department of State, March 18, 2008). The US Department of State described Al-Shabab as 'a violent and brutal extremist group with a number of individuals affiliated with al-Qa'ida. Many of its senior leaders are believed to have trained and fought with al-Qaida in Afghanistan' (Ibid). In 2009 a US official stated in the *Washington Post*: 'It's hard to tell where Shabab ends and Al-Qaeda in East Africa begins. That's how closely they are linked' (Hsu, 2009).

Washington's concerns soon translated into action when Ayro and several other senior Al-Shabab leaders were killed by a US air strike in May 2008. In September 2009, US Special Forces killed Saleh Ali Saleh Nebhan, a man they claimed was the primary link between Al-Shabab and Al-Qaeda's leadership in Pakistan (Temple-Raston, 2009). The killing of Nebhan prompted an open threat from the Al-Shabab leadership directed at America: 'The United States is Islam's known enemy and we will never expect mercy from them, nor should they expect mercy from us' (Agence France Presse, September 15, 2009). In 2010 the relationship between Al-Shabab and Al-Qaeda was all but confirmed when, following Nabhan's death, Al-Shabab was taken over by fellow Al-Qaeda operative Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, a native Comoran who has been linked to several terrorist plots and has long been a middleman between the two groups (Lorenzo et al. 2010: 224). For the first time, on 7 June 2012 the US Department's Rewards for Justice offered rewards for information on seven key leaders of the Al-Shabab terrorist group. The report stated that:

> The U.S. Department of State has authorized a reward of up to $7 million for information leading to the location of Al-Shabab founder Ahmed Abdi aw-Mohamed; up to $5 million each for information leading to the location of his associates Ibrahim Haji Jama, Fuad Mohamed Khalaf, Bashir Mohamed Mohamoud, and Mukhtar Robow; and up to $3 million each for information leading to the location of additional Al-Shabab leaders Zakariya Ismail Ahmed Hersi and Abdullahi Yare (US Department of State, 7 June 2012).

The seven individuals named above are key leaders of the Al-Shabab terrorist organization:

> Aw-Mohamed, born July 10, 1977, in Hargeysa, is the operational commander of Al-Shabab in Somalia. Jama is a key leader from Somaliland who helped form the Harakat Shabaab al-Mujahidin movement and reportedly trained and fought in Afghanistan. Khalaf, a dual Somali and Swedish national, has raised funds for the organization and helped direct attacks in Somalia. Mahamoud, believed to have been born between 1979 and 1982, is an Al-Shabab military commander and coordinator for al-Qaida operations in Somalia. Robow, born in 1969, has served as an Al-Shabab spokesperson and also has also served as the group's spiritual leader. Hersi acts as Al-Shabab's head of intelligence. Yare is the head of Al-Shabab's media operations, and is also deputy to Aw-Mohamed (US Department of State, 7 June, 2012).

It is important to note that the growth of information and communication technology (ICT) has enhanced the operational capability 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 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, 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 handle to disseminate messages goading Kenyan authorities and claim responsibility for the Westgate attack. 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).

Understanding the Global Jihadism of Al-Qaeda

Al-Qaeda has been described as '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 initially emerged from a network of Arab volunteers who, in the 1980s, fought in Afghanistan under the banner of Islam against Soviet Communism (BBC, 20 July, 2004). The name 'Al-Qaeda' itself derives from an Arabic word for 'foundation' or 'basis.' Bin Laden explained the origin of the term in a videotape interview with Al Jazeera 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 (CNN, February 5, 2002).

Al-Qaeda's agenda is ideological, religious and political in nature, including (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,' and (c) 'the liberation of Muslim territories from foreign occupation, and the use of holy war (lesser jihad) to bind Muslims together and lead them through a "clash of civilization" that will rid the Muslim world of non-Muslim cultural and political influence' (Agbiboa, 2013). In a bid to build a coherent ideology (*manhaj*) that will unify all Islamists terrorist groups, Al-Qaeda leaders drew from *takfiri* thought, which justifies attacking corrupt and 'apostate' governments in Muslim lands, and on materials that not only stress the need for militant groups to amalgamate, but also outline the Muslim requirement to target the global enemy (typically the US and the rest of the West). Subsequently, 'the hybrid ideology that emerged makes little distinction between targeting local enemies and targeting global ones and have a one-size-fits-all solution—jihad' (Farall, 2011: 132). Hence, Al-Qaeda subsidiaries like Al-Shabab are only required to expand their focus, not abandon their own local agenda.

The development of a coherent ideology helped Al-Qaeda acquire franchises which are crucial for projecting the organisation's power and gaining traction for its global jihad movement, based on the ideology of *Salafiya-Jihadia* (which evolved in the second half of the twentieth century) – 'an extremist offshoot of the Salafi ideology that was developed in the Muslim world during the first half of the twentieth century [and which] calls for a total return to the lifestyle of the early days of Islam [and] the implementation of Sharia (Islamic religious law) across the Muslim world as a prelude for its implementation all over the globe' (Gunaratna and Oreg, 2010: 1047).

Al-Qaeda Franchises

The Al-Qaeda organisation founded a regional branch in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and acquired franchises in Iraq (AQI) and the Maghreb (AQIM), reinforcing the organisation's ability to present itself as the leading Islamist militant group. Even as they pursued local agendas, the franchises were required to undertake some attacks against Western interests, and leaders of groups like Al-Shabab 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' (Farall, 2011: 132). Some observers, for example, have argued that 'the Westgate attack in Kenya bears the hallmarks of new guidelines reportedly released by Al-Qaeda leadership, instructing affiliated groups to use hostages to attract maximum publicity and may signal a more global focus by Al-Shabab leadership' (Blanchard 2013: 4).

Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jihadist movements include: (1) Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, targeting Yemen and Saudi Arabia in particular; (2) Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, attacking the Shi'ite dominated government and community of Iraq and fighting the Alawite regime in Syria, while also engaging in operations against neighbouring (Sunni) Jordan; (3) Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, operating against Uzbekistan and also engaged in Tajikistan, Russia, Turkey, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Chinese Turkestan (Xinjiang) as well as in Afghanistan and Pakistan in support of Taliban allies; (4) Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, targeting Algeria, Mali, Morocco, and latterly Libya; (5) Al-Shabab, operating in Somalia and also in neighbouring East African jurisdictions; (6) Taliban and Haqqani networks in Afghanistan and Pakistan; (7) Jemaah Islamiyah, operating in Indonesia and also Malaysia and Singapore; (8) East Turkistan Islamic Movement and Turkistan Islamic Party waging a militant campaign for Uighur independence from China; (9) Jund al-Khilafah, struggling for an Islamic Kazakhstan, while also operating in Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Caucuses and even as far afield as Western Europe; (10) Boko Haram, waging a terror campaign in the Muslim areas in northern Nigeria (see Rudner, 2013: 960-961).

Al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamist groups have all attacked Western interests in their respective regions. AQAP has been looking to expand its attacks beyond Yemen and Saudi Arabia, as demonstrated by the botched attempt to explode a bomb on a flight over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009 and, in October 2010, the abortive plot to bomb cargo plane. AQI was allegedly involved in London and Glasgow bomb plots that occurred in June 2007. In Pakistan, the Taliban has extended its attack targets beyond Pakistan's borders to include Europe and the US. The 2008 Mumbai attacks was clear evidence that Al-Qaeda's idea of attacking Islam's global enemies has found a fertile ground among Pakistan's Islamist groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, which in the past focused only on Indian targets (Bergen et al. 2011: 74). In 2010, Nigeria's Boko Haram

launched a suicide car bombing of the UN building in the capital, Abuja. Shortly after, Boko Haram released a statement that read: 'All over the world, the UN is a global partner in the oppression of believers. We are at war against infidels. In Nigeria, the Federal Government tries to perpetuate the agenda of the United Nations... We have told everyone that the UN is the bastion of the global oppression of Muslims all over the world' (*The Punch*, September 2 2011).

To what degree does Al-Qaeda exercise command and control over its dispersed structure and subsidiaries like Al-Shabab? Al-Qaeda is not a hierarchical organisation with full control over its franchises. Rather, the organisation operates largely 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' (Farall, 2011: 133). 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 News, 20 July, 2004). As a result, uprooting the organisation in its entirety has been a 'highly complex and frustrating task' (Ibid). Due to the already existing unifying ideology, Al-Qaeda need only provide 'strategic leadership' rather than 'day-to-day oversight' (Ibid). Nevertheless, before launching any attack, all Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups are required to seek approval from the central leadership. The aim is to ensure that attacks, like the Westgate attack, reinforce, not undermine, Al-Qaeda's strategic objectives. Thus, Al-Qaeda's management philosophy has been described as 'centralisation of decision and decentralisation of execution' (Agbiboa, 2013b).

Conclusion

This article has explored the evolution and transformation of Somalia's Al-Shabab using the recent Westgate attack as a frame of reference. The article argued that Al-Shabab's Westgate attack should be understood in the light of the group's growing friendship with Al-Qaeda which has radically altered the group's ideology, targets, and operational strategy. Clearly, Al-Shabab's continued terrorist activity is not detached from that of other jihadist groups in Africa – including Boko Haram, Ansaru, Tuareg, and Al-Qaeda's North African wing – and beyond. It should be recalled that in 2012, US military officials warned that these jihadist outfits were increasingly joining forces to coordinate and improve their violent attacks (Agbiboa, 2013d). Military crackdowns on these groups in recent years – the Nigerian military on Boko Haram; the French attack on Al-Qaeda affiliates in Mali; the Ethiopian and African Union routing of Al-Shabab from Somalia – have been incendiary and counterproductive, failing to stamp out Islamist terrorism. In the case of Al-Shabab, the 'Global War on Terror facilitated their rapid development and their use of extreme tactics that were further sharpened by the exclusiveness of their ideology' (Marchal, 2009: 399).

Processes of globalisation have facilitated the spread of terrorism that extends across and beyond national borders – as the recent Westgate attack demonstrates – blurring the boundaries between domestic and transnational terrorism. This holds at least two significant implications for how we think about and prepare responses to terrorist groups like Al-Shabab. One implication is the urgent need to better understand their power, command and control relationships with the global jihad network. Another implication is the need for countries fighting terror, like Somalia, to be assisted in strengthening their intelligence and civilian institutions, promoting the rule of law, and addressing the underlying existential and ideological conditions that radicalises Islamist groups and fuel terrorism without borders.

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