



Kenya Struggles to Combat Al-Shabaab's Cross-Border Attacks

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Al-Shabaab has increased attacks in areas near the Kenyan border in recent months, as local and international military action pushes the al-Qaeda affiliated group out of its hideouts in southern Somalia. Analysts believe the militants now have bases in the north and northeastern regions of Mandera, Wajir and Garissa, with about 100 militants operating in the area (Coastweek, September 2).

The movement of heavily armed fighters into small towns and villages along the Kenya-Somali border has been triggered by a sustained and relatively successful campaign from the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), as well as an anticipated drought (Intelligence Brief, October 17). But it may also be part of a strategy that was first articulated by the late al-Shabaab emir Shaykh Ahmed Abdi Godane, who sought to develop the group's wider regional ambitions.

Porous Borders

In two recent attacks in Mandera town, close to the border with Somalia and Ethiopia, militants have inflicted serious civilian casualties and been able to disappear back over the border as the security forces responded.

On October 25, al-Shabaab militants killed 12 people in Mandera in an attack on a local hotel. Arriving in the early morning, the militants used explosives to break into Bisharo Guest House in which non-Muslims were spending the night. The majority of those killed were quarry workers from central Kenya, but also among the dead were a number of actors from Nairobi who were on an educational tour (The Standard, October 25). Kenyan security forces responded to the attack, but the gunmen escaped into Somalia.

Only a couple of weeks earlier, on October 5, militants killed six people in an attack on a residential compound in the town during which the gunmen used a grenade to break through the compound gates and chose victims at random. The security forces responded swiftly, according to reports, and rescued nearly 25 people, but again the militants fled into Somalia (The Star, October 6).

Engaging in a war of revenge, the militants have targeted civilians in the hopes of whipping up emotions and eroding public support for the Kenyan military presence in Somalia.

The fighters have also carried out hit-and-run attacks using grenades and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) on military convoys and camps, police stations and government installations.

In September, gunmen killed a police commander and two other officers along the Lafey-Elwak road in Mandera County, after hitting a police vehicle with a rocket-propelled grenade. The attack occurred hours after the police launched a manhunt for militants who had attempted to attack the military in the area (Coastweek, September 2). Earlier, in April, the militants attacked a police station in Diff, a town center in Wajir County, located 10 kilometers from Somalia. The militants stole a police vehicle and ammunition and fled to across the border (The Star, April 10).

Al-Hijra Network

In carrying out these attacks, al-Shabaab has allegedly relied on a local network of trusted agents and sympathizers it established over time in parts of Kenya. One element of the network is believed to be Jaysh al Ayman, a unit set up by Godane, al-Shabaab's late former leader, in 2012. The second is al-Hijra, formerly the Muslim Youth Centre (MYC), which recruited its followers from the Majengo slums of Nairobi and the coastal city of Mombasa.

The group was formed by Ahmed Iman Ali, a Muslim preacher in Nairobi who fled to Somalia in 2009, and was led in the coastal region by Sheikh Aboud Rogo Mohammed, who was killed in 2012 when unidentified gunmen opened fire on his vehicle. (The Star, July 20, 2013). His wife was also injured in the attack.

In 2012, the group announced its partnership with al-Shabaab and changed its name to al-Hijra, a reference to Prophet Mohammed's escape from the holy city of Mecca to Medina and is intended to represent its own followers' supposed religious persecution by the government (Mareeg, July 28, 2013).

According to the security services, both al-Hijra and Jaysh al Ayman are active in Lamu County (The Standard, December 24, 2015; The Standard, February 28). Their operatives have been active in the Boni Forest, a dense woodland that straddles the Somali border in Lamu County. The forest's caves and dense vegetation has provided good cover for training camps and bases from which to launch attacks.

From the forest, the fighters have been able to launch attacks on towns and villages in Lamu County. The bloodiest was what is now known as the Mpeketoni Massacre in June 2014, in which militants killed more than 50 people (Horseed Media, March 3, 2015).

Kenya's Response

Under pressure from the recent attacks and threatened by the build-up of militants on its border, Kenya has bolstered intelligence sharing with regional and international partners battling al-Shabaab. Additionally, it has scaled up patrols near the border region, reportedly boosting the number of police in the region (Nep Journal September 20).

In 2015, the government deployed the army into Boni Forest to destroy the militants' infrastructure and flush out al-Shabaab fighters hiding there. Dubbed Operation Linda Boni, the campaign has made the forest and the surrounding area more secure, but is a long way from eradicating the threat (Daily Nation, May 23, 2016).

Meanwhile, in Nairobi and Mombasa, the government has utilized CCTV cameras and other modern technologies for surveillance. Earlier this year, Kenya purchased an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) known as ScanEagle from the United States at a cost of \$9.86 million, touted as one of Kenya's most significant counterterrorism purchases (The EastAfrican, February 25).

New Approach Needed

The northern and coastal border regions are an easy location for the militants to operate due to their close proximity to war-torn Somalia. The areas are also remote, often hostile to the government and underdeveloped due to many years of neglect by Nairobi.

Yet, the upsurge in attacks may also be part of a long-term strategy, pegged on turning al-Shabaab into a regional terror organization, following Shaykh Godane's plan for the group before his death in 2013. The current emir, Sheikh Ahmed Umar Abu Ubaidah, recently called for a wave of attacks across East Africa (e-

NCA, July 17, 2015). He has threatened attacks in Ethiopia, Djibouti and Uganda. There are even suggestions the group has an eye on Tanzania (IPPMedia, August 18).

As Kenya forces focus on neutralizing al-Shabaab in southern Somalia, the group's presence is slowly encroaching on East Africa's biggest economy. Evidently, a new counterterrorism approach is needed to stop the militant group's incursions along the border and end its presence in Kenya.

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