Legacy of an Exile: How al-Shabaab Was Inspired by and Learned from Usama bin Ladin

By Dr. Kris Inman

Introduction

This report examines the motivations behind al-Shabaab attacks on Kenya and the implications of these motivations for Kenyan national security strategy. Based on evidence gathered from a comparative document analysis of al-Qaida and al-Shabaab public statements, the main argument of this report is that al-Shabaab is targeting Kenya because of its status as a major political and economic power in East Africa. The group hopes its attacks will draw Kenya into a perpetual cycle of conflict that drains Kenya’s coffers and turns citizens against the government. Al-Shabaab is confident it can outlast Kenya in such a conflict because it sees itself as having a higher will to fight and an ability to rally Muslims

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behind its cause. The group believes that the successful implementation of this strategy will have a ripple effect that extends far beyond Kenya and Somalia.

Al-Shabaab’s strategic vision, as this report details, draws inspiration from a similar approach that Usama bin Ladin developed for confronting the United States—a strategy he developed as an exile in the Sudan. This strategy involved starting a cycle of jujitsu politics, characterized as using the enemy’s strengths (in this case, economic strength) against him in order to win the war.¹ Considering the motivations that shape al-Shabaab strategy, it is essential that Kenyan leaders respond to al-Shabaab attacks in a measured manner that avoids: 1) bogging their military down in a war with al-Shabaab, and 2) harsh responses that produce collateral damage that could be used against Kenya in the larger war for public support. In other words, military means will not solve the al-Shabaab problem for Kenya.

The Rise in al-Shabaab Attacks on Kenya

In 2006, battle-hardened jihadists came together to form al-Shabaab amid the anarchy of the Somali civil war. Since its early days as a terrorist organization focused on attacks inside Somalia, al-Shabaab has evolved into a group with larger regional ambitions. This strategic shift became apparent in 2010, when the group dispatched suicide bombers who struck civilian targets inside Ethiopia, killing 74 people and injuring 100 others. Since 2010, the group has conducted over 200 attacks outside Somalia. The vast majority of these attacks occurred in Kenya, to include the horrific 2013 attack on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi.²

Publically, al-Shabaab has declared that these attacks are in response to Kenya’s Operation Linda Nchi (ONL, Kiswahili for “protect the nation”). Kenyan leaders authorized this operation to block al-Shabaab attacks by establishing a 100-kilometer buffer zone between Kenya and Somalia.³ Al-Shabaab leaders have characterized this operation as an invasion of the Muslim land of Somalia. The problem with linking al-Shabaab attacks to

¹This research report is based on a larger study on the legacy of exiles that the author developed after attending the Conable Conference in International Studies at the Rochester Institute of Technology in April 2015. The author would like to thank Ms. Phuong Hoang and Mr. Andrew Chadwick for their assistance in drafting this report from the larger study.
²Dan Reed, Terror at the Mall, HBO Documentary (2014).
this operation is that Ethiopia invaded Somalia in 2007, and Uganda has deployed troops into Somalia as part of the ongoing African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Yet, as Figure 1 shows, al-Shabaab has limited its attacks on these countries.

One popular explanation for al-Shabaab’s targeting focus is that Kenya is somehow a “soft target” in terms of military strength or socioeconomic conditions. Kenya, however, has the second strongest military in East Africa, behind only Ethiopia. Kenya does suffer from some “deep-seated structural state weaknesses and challenges” like unemployment and marginalized communities. Historically, these conditions can create a favorable environment for terrorists to operate. But Kenya is not the only East African state that faces these challenges. Similar conditions exist to the same degree—if not worse—in Ethiopia and Uganda. In fact, Kenya ranks higher on the Human Development Index than Ethiopia and Uganda. The real motivations behind al-Shabaab’s attacks on Kenya could be found in strategic theories it may have inherited from associated organizations like al-Qaida.

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Al-Qaida’s Strategic Playbook

Usama bin Ladin was the chief architect of al-Qaida’s strategic playbook, which he developed primarily during his four years as a Saudi political exile living in the Sudan during the mid-1990s. As an exile, living relatively free from observation by Saudi intelligence services, bin Ladin gained the space to develop a new al-Qaida strategy that aimed to use U.S. military and economic strength against itself. In other words, he embraced a jujitsu politics-styled military strategy. This strategy envisioned an al-Qaida-led insurgency provoking the United States into committing its military and economic might to a protracted war in the Muslim world that would ultimately end in its defeat and set the conditions for a new golden age in Islamic history.

Bin Ladin’s new strategic vision, as articulated in his fatwas, rested upon three assumptions. First, he believed that terrorist attacks against the United States would provoke it into deploying ground forces into the Middle East. Second, the presence of U.S. troops on Muslim lands engaged in a war against Islamist fighters would convince the greater Muslim world to unify against a common threat. Finally, determined Islamist fighters could protract a war with the United States that would eventually cause the collapse of the U.S. economy, forcing U.S. policymakers to withdraw their military and economic support to their allies in the region, like the Saudis and the Israelis. With the United States vanquished, al-Qaida and its allies could topple the existing Mideast political order and re-establish a unified Islamic empire. Bin Ladin believed that the collapse of the Soviet Union, which he attributed to the mujahideen’s victory in Afghanistan, proved that this strategy was feasible. In his mind, the United States would collapse in a

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8 This paper draws its information on Usama bin Ladin’s strategy primarily from his fatwas issued in the late 1990s, such as his 1996 Declaration of Jihad against the Americans and his 1998 Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders.
similar manner, as the U.S. withdrawal from Somalia in 1993 following the Black Hawk Down incident seemed to suggest. Bin Ladin set his strategy in motion with a series of attacks against U.S. targets, culminating in the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington.

**An Alternate Explanation for al-Shabaab Strategy in East Africa**

Until his death in 2011, bin Ladin was a strong supporter of al-Shabaab, and his intellectual influences, specifically his preference for jujitsu politics, are evident in the group’s actions and public statements. Like bin Ladin, al-Shabaab has decided to focus its military efforts on a major economic power: Kenya, which is East Africa’s investment and financial hub. And also like bin Ladin, al-Shabaab is attempting to defeat its preferred target by dragging it into a bloody war of attrition aimed at destroying its economic strength and will to fight. Recent statements released by al-Shabaab leaders following the commencement of ONL highlight their strategic reasoning:

> The Kenyan public must understand that the impetuous decision by their troops to cross the border into Somalia will not be without severe repercussions. The bloody battles that will ensue as a result of this incursion will most likely disrupt the social equilibrium and imperil the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians; and with war consequently comes a significant loss of lives; instability, destruction to the local economy, and a critical lack of security.

Turning this vision into reality against an economically powerful state like Kenya would demonstrate the power of al-Shabaab while altering the regional balance of power in a manner that favored al-Shabaab’s strategic goals.

To rally support for its cause, al-Shabaab has followed bin Ladin’s strategic playbook by attempting to unite Muslims against a foreign adversary.

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The main way that they have pursued this goal is by characterizing the Kenyan military as a force of infidels invading a Muslim land. In response to Kenyan actions inside Somalia, Sheikh Mukhtar Abu al-Zubair (also known as Godane) has implored Muslims to “attack them [Kenya, Ethiopia, and AMISOM contributors] successively and continue your raids, prevent them from rest, storm their headquarters, target their routes, eradicate them by explosives, terrorize them by martyrdom, and do not be concerned of their numbers.”\(^{11}\) Al-Shabaab leaders have also called attention to past incidents of violence between Kenya and Muslim communities. For instance, statements released in April 2015 following the Garissa University attack recall cases in which Kenyan forces have committed atrocities against Muslims in Somalia, such as the Bulla Karatasi Massacre of 1980 and the Wagalla Massacre of 1984.\(^{12}\)

Al-Shabaab’s messaging tactics, combined with its decision to focus attacks on Kenya, suggest that the group has fully embraced a jujitsu politics-styled strategy for increasing its power in Somalia and beyond. Thus, it is not some inherent weakness or some specific action by its leadership that has brought Kenya into al-Shabaab’s crosshairs. Rather, Kenya’s economic strength and influence are what have made it al-Shabaab’s preferred target.

Conclusions and Implications

Viewing al-Shabaab’s attacks in Kenya through the lens of jujitsu politics implies a different response than what the common wisdom suggests. First, bleeding the enemy dry economically by forcing him to divert more resources to armed forces is a specific terrorist strategy. To date, Kenya’s military spending has been at consistent levels since 2005 (between 8 and 9 percent of government expenditures).\(^{13}\) Second, al-Shabaab thrives when


\(^{13}\) Military expenditure data are a World Bank Indicator, see http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.ZS/countries/KE-ET-UG?display=graph.
Kenya responds militarily. Regardless of the facts, al-Shabaab casts its war in terms of oppression toward Muslims. This creates a perception of hostility toward Islam that has proven to be a powerful unifying factor and recruitment tool, perpetuating the cycle of violence. To counter this rhetoric, Kenya should work with its Muslim leadership to provide a unified counter-point to al-Shabaab, one that is based on a moderate and orthodox interpretation of Holy Muslim texts. To counter any Islamophobic tendencies within the non-Muslim Kenyan populations, Kenya should engage the interfaith community. A Council of Religions, which works with marginalized communities to bring social services and education, would provide a much stronger antidote to al-Shabaab than a military response.

Finally, Kenya should convene a public relations campaign that details the atrocities that al-Shabaab has committed against Muslims. It frequently kills and injures Muslims during its attacks in Kenya and elsewhere. Many of the people that the al-Shabaab militants murdered at the Westgate Mall were Muslims. Survivors of such atrocities have struggled to understand how adherents to their faith, the name of which means “Peace,” could perpetrate such heinous attacks on innocents and innocence. Scholars have cataloged the killing of Muslims as one of the reasons why people have defected from al-Shabaab. Therefore, if the Kenyan government or civil society highlighted al-Shabaab’s targeted brutality toward fellow Muslims, it would likely go a long way in countering the group’s recruitment, sympathy, and ability to operate inside Kenya. Most importantly, these non-militaristic responses would break the cycle of jujitsu politics in which al-Shabaab currently has Kenya engaged.

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14The events in Kampala, Uganda, and Nairobi, Kenya, that are described here are well documented in the international media, so I do not provide copious citations here.