Sundered in Somalia: Al-Shabaab Entrenches in Kenya

By Marc Simms

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The Somali terrorist organisation, al-Shabaab, have not been having a very good month. Firstly, they have been suffering a string of defeats in their conflict with the Somali government and African Union forces, capitulating and allowing key towns to be captured with little in the way of resistance.

Secondly, their leader was killed in a targeted air strike by the American military on September 2nd. Ahmed Abdi Godane was a veteran of the Afghan Jihad, and had led al-Shabaab since the group's split with the Islamic Courts Union in 2007. As such, his loss is a tremendous blow to the group.

Nevertheless, it is too early to be discounting al-Shabaab entirely. While the news from Somalia is welcome, it is in the nature of irregular military forces that they avoid head-on conflict where possible, and prefer to attack more vulnerable targets. As such, the condition of al-Shabaab in Kenya is a worrying sign that, even if the group is mostly defeated in Somalia, it will nevertheless remain a problem in the region.

Al-Shabaab has targeted Kenya since 2010, in response to that government's alleged training of Somalian soldiers – a claim the Kenyan government at the time denied, but has since become a self-fulfilling prophecy in the face of al-Shabaab border incursions and attacks. This violence culminated in the dramatic and tragic Westgate mall attacks in Nairobi in 2013, where al-Shabaab took hundreds hostage and killed upwards of 40 people.

That attack was just over a year ago, and in the aftermath of the violence, the Kenyan government admitted there had been critical flaws in their counter-terrorism policy and response. Yet, a year on, it seems little has been learned. Indeed, al-Shabaab are becoming in the words of the International Crisis Group "more entrenched and active" than ever before in the country.

As the ICG's report is keen to point out, this is due to a "perfect storm" of factors which, unfortunately, hamper Kenya's ability to respond in an effective fashion to al-Shabaab's advances into their country. Chief among these problems are the divided nature of the Kenyan political landscape which has sought to play with terrorism for political gain, the marginalisation of Kenya's Muslim population, a police force whose human rights violations are nearly as horrific as the terrorists they oppose and the all pervasive corruption that constrains and limits the above actors, as well as other institutions and mechanisms of state which could otherwise contribute to decreasing the terrorism threat.

Ethnic tensions and political opposition

Though it seems to have been mostly forgotten about now, the 2007-08 Kenyan crisis is a key illustration of how community tensions, ethnicity and politics can have deadly implications in Kenya. Though this article cannot do full justice to the complexity of the situation, to simplify, allegations of corruption in the election of President Kibaki lead to political violence. As voting in the election had been drawn mostly along ethnic lines, and

there was a widespread perception of Kikuyu domination in Kenyan politics, Kikuyu in opposition-majority areas were targeted for violence.

Over 1000 people were killed, and half a million displaced in that crisis, before mediation and a new coalition government brought an end to the violence. While thankfully the 2013 elections did not see a repeat of this scenario, it nevertheless highlights a key division in Kenyan society, one that makes it vulnerable on the question of confronting al-Shabaab. The incentives for exploiting the problem of terrorism for electoral gain in such a hotly contested and fraught political environment outweigh the benefits of political unity on the issue.

In addition to this, there has been the unfortunate conflation of al-Shabaab with other Kenyan security problems, most notably the Mombasa Republican Council, a separatist group drawing support from the Coastal Region. Despite little evidence linking the groups together, Kenyan politicians have justified crackdowns on MRC supporters with reference to al-Shabaab's activities.

Kenya's Muslims

Muslims account for 11.1% of the population of Kenya, but adherents of Islam mostly come from the aforementioned Coastal or Northern regions of the country, which are sparsely populated and underrepresented in central Kenyan government.

While Kenya's Muslim population has existed for centuries, it has largely existed in the shadow of a larger Christian population. Historically these relations have been amicable, but the openly sectarian nature of al-Shabaab's rhetoric and attacks have contributed to a siege mentality among some Christian communities, and even a backlash against Islam as a whole. This may explain why the government counter-terrorism measures have been exceptionally heavy-handed and rely extensively on racial profiling.

Extra-judicial killings and police brutality

As mentioned in the above link, this targeting of Kenya's Muslim population has gone hand-in-hand with suspect disappearances and killings, acts which have raised suspicions that "death squads" may be operating among the police force.

This would not be the first time such allegations have been directed at the Kenyan police. In 2009, the UN rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary and arbitrary executions, Philip Aston, issued a report which showed deep police complicity in death squads operating against rebel groups in western Kenya as well as the capitol, Nairobi.

Allegations have persisted that these tactics are now being deployed against suspected al-Shabaab members and their supporters. A number of radical imams have been killed by mystery gunmen. Along with these assassinations, there have been reports of torture, unlawful rendition and summary deportation programs, which raise the spectre of the Kenyan security services waging a "dirty war" in the country.

Needless to say, such tactics only play into the hands of al-Shabaab and those who wish to convince Kenyan Muslims that the state is waging all-out war against them.

As a result of the above issues, even if al-Shabaab are driven from Somalia – as looks increasingly likely – that will not reduce the threat to Kenya. Al-Shabaab would be a risk regardless of how well functioning a polity Kenya is, but there is no escaping the conclusion that these problems will exacerbate what is already an unstable and dangerous situation.   If Kenya is to successfully and permanently deal with al-Shabaab, it will first have to oversee a painful and difficult period of political and administrative restructuring. Unfortunately, with the violence continuing, the likelihood is that the incentives to do so will be ignored in favour of more short-term goals.