Why Al-Shabaab Targets Kenya

Al-Shabaab has claimed that its January 15 attack on the Dusit D2 Complex was [revenge](#) for President Donald Trump's decision to move the United States embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. This is not the first time that a terrorist attack conducted on Kenyan soil has been justified by its perpetrators on the basis of events occurring thousands of miles away. For instance, the date of the August 7 1998 Al-Qaeda attack on the U.S embassy in Nairobi [coincided](#) with the same date, in 1991, when U.S troops first landed in Saudi-Arabia in preparation for the Gulf War, which Al-Qaeda regarded as a Christian invasion of 'Muslim lands'.

Kenya may have suffered these attacks since it is considered a key ally of the West. But why is Al-Shabaab (an Al-Qaeda affiliate) targeting Kenya more than it is other countries in the region, such as Ethiopia and Uganda, which also have close ties with the West and have fought Al-Shabaab in Somalia? To what extent does Al-Shabaab attack Kenya for the reasons it publicly gives? Will Al-Shabaab, for example, stop targeting Kenya if the Kenya Defence Forces [pulled out](#) of Somalia?

Also, why are Kenyans, many of whom are recent converts to Islam, joining Al-Shabaab? Four of the five Dusit D2 attackers were Kenyans. [Some](#) analysts have found that status, adventure seeking, financial gain and revenge are prominent drivers of enlistment, while others submit that [ideological commitments](#) to an Islamist vision, driven by local Muslim experiences and a global narrative of 'Muslim victimization' have stronger explanatory power. Others have argued that it is due to a [combination](#) of wider socioeconomic conditions, and individual-level psychosocial characteristics that turn young converts to a path of violent extremism. At the same time, an authoritative [account](#) of Al-Shabaab recruitment in Somalia found that despite the varied and complex motivations for joining the group, the most common reasons given include a

quest for justice through Sharia legislation and an idea of 'defensive' or 'offensive' jihad. This way of understanding the world can be regarded as empowering for some individuals, as membership can be compared to a conversion process, which can be considered a central benefit — more than access to material resources — of participating in 'jihad movements'. These questions and debates, which have preoccupied a community of analysts and practitioners within a broad-based programme for policy intervention commonly referred to as Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), have been laid bare, yet again, in the unfolding drama of the DusitD2 attack.

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At the centre of the attack was [Ali Salim Gichunge](#), the son of a Meru military officer, and the leader of the cell that was behind the attack, and his wife, [Violet Kemunto Omwoyo](#), a Kisii convert to Islam, and journalism graduate at the Masinde Muliro University in Western Kenya. Their story is important as it not only defies Kenya's ethnic fictions, but also disrupts widespread perceptions of Islamist violence in the country.

Yet, the story of Gichunge and Kemunto is not entirely new, peripheral nor fringe. Exactly six years before Gichunge stormed DusitD2 with his associates, wearing his baseball cap on backwards, wielding an AK-47 rifle [smuggled](#) from Somalia, and baying for the blood of innocent civilians, Al-Shabaab announced the appointment of an 'ideological leader' for its Kenyan operations: [Ahmed Iman Ali](#), then about 40 years old and of mixed Meru and Kamba origins. In the January 2012 [video](#) released by Al-Shabaab's media wing, *al-Kataib*, Iman Ali — he

grew up in the Majengo slums of Nairobi, graduated with an engineering degree from the University of Nairobi, and became the secretary of Majengo's largest mosque, the Pumwani Riyadha Mosque, before fleeing to Somalia to join Al-Shabaab in 2009 — described Kenya as *dar-al-harb* — the house of war. Its people, he said, were legitimate targets of violent attacks.

Why are Kenyans, many of whom are recent converts to Islam, joining Al-Shabaab?

Years before he joined Al-Shabaab, Iman Ali led an ouster of the Pumwani Mosque committee, which he accused of corruption and embezzlement. Speaking against a litany of socio-economic hardships afflicting his predominantly Muslim neighbourhood, Iman Ali was a powerful balm for Majengo's long-felt sense of exclusion and powerlessness in a Christian-dominated country.

That was in 2007. In 2012 when he was announced leader of Al-Shabaab's Kenya operations, he was [believed](#) to be in command of hundreds of foreign fighters with the Somalia-based group, most of whom were his childhood friends from Majengo, with origins in Central Kenya, Rift Valley, Nyanza and Western regions.

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Gichunge had himself [graduated](#) from high-school in 2011 with a mean grade of C+, and after his hopes of playing rugby for his school were dashed after he was bullied by other students — it led to him having to change schools — he turned his to Information Technology. It was while working at a cyber-café

in Isiolo that Gichunge, who was raised in a strict Muslim household, got introduced to radical online sheikhs. He left Isiolo for Somalia immediately after that. Amongst the group of Kenyan Al-Shabaab militants he met in Somalia were former bandits, some with serious criminal records.

Most of these recruits would have been shuttled to Somalia by [Juma Ayub Otit Were](#), a Muslim-Luhya born and raised in the Huruma slums of Nairobi. After he was accused of theft by his employer in Eastleigh, losing his job as a result, Ayub secured a new role with Iman Ali's outfit, the Muslim Youth Centre (MYC), where he became responsible for shuttling a large number of recruits from Nairobi's slums and other parts of up-country Kenya to Somalia to join Al-Shabaab. The police, who were trailing his activities, code-named him 'Taxi-Driver'.

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Some of the early recruits, like [Sylvester Opiyo](#) and [Kassim Omondi](#) aka Budalangi, both of whom hailed from Nairobi's Majengo slums; and [Jeremiah Okumu](#) aka Duda Black and [Stephen Mwanzi](#) aka Duda Brown, who hailed from Nairobi's Kibera slums, were all well-known thugs before joining Al-Shabaab. Their predisposition towards violence and unlawful behaviour turned a new leaf when the prospects for military training with Al-Shabaab in Somalia became more imminent. After developing networks with Iran, Ali's group at the Pumwani Riyadha Mosque, whose influence since 2007 had spread to other mosques in Nairobi, especially those located in neighbourhoods long-neglected by government service, namely Masjid Kibera, Masjid Huruma, and the Masjid Nuur in Kawangware, they quickly converted to Islam and travelled to Somalia to join Al-Shabaab. They were funnelled towards Al-Shabaab's [Majimmo' sector](#) in Southern Somalia – an area of operations assigned

predominantly to East African militants — under the command of the then 25 year-old Titus Nabiswa, who was a recent convert to Islam from Bungoma in western Kenya. In Nabiswa's group were other militants from the Kenya coast, who had largely been radicalised by the sermons and mosque lectures (*darsas*) of the late [Sheikh Aboud Rogo](#) and the late Abubakar Shariff, aka [Makaburi](#), two Mombasa preachers who had come to symbolise the face of Islamist terror in Kenya. Also in the group were Kenyan-Somalis (mostly from Nairobi's Eastleigh and South C districts), including foreign militants such as [Jermaine Grant](#) and [Thomas Evans](#) from England, and [Andreas Martin Mueller](#) from Germany.

> *By 2012, Ali Gichunge, who was partly raised inside the Isiolo army barracks, was screening new Kenyan recruits in Baidoa, almost all of whom were Christian converts to Islam.*

Upon their [return](#) to Kenya in 2010, some members of this group were responsible for a spate of killings, targeted especially at police officers, including twin-grenade [attacks](#) at Uhuru Park on June 13 that killed six people during a [campaign rally](#) organised by Christian leaders to drum up opposition against the proposed constitution of 2010. The police responded strongly to this violence, which seemed unsanctioned by Al-Shabaab's core leadership in Somalia, was distinctively unilateral, and largely uncoordinated.

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Rogo most probably by Kenyan security forces — most returnees of the *Majimmo* sector group had either been arrested, killed, or were on the run from the police. For instance, Stephen Mwanzi and Jeremiah Okumu were [abducted](#) in Kisauni, Mombasa, in June 2012, never to be seen again; Kassim Omondi was killed in a [gun-fight](#) with the police who had gone to arrest him in his Githurai hideout in May 2013; while Titus Nabiswa was arrested and later killed during an [escape attempt](#) in Majengo, Mombasa in October 2012. Jermaine Grant was [arrested](#) in Kisauni, Mombasa, in December 2011, but his accomplices, [Fuad Manswab Abubakar](#) and Samantha Lewthwaite, aka, the [white widow](#), and who earned her moniker from the death of her ex-husband (and Grant's friend) [Germaine Lindsay](#) when he blew himself up during the London bombings of 2005, escaped to Somalia.

The security threat posed by this group had been eliminated. Or so it seemed.

Amniyaat and Jaysh Ayman

Meanwhile, Al-Shabaab's reclusive and ambitious former leader, the late [Ahmed Abdi Godane](#), was in search of a more potent offensive against Kenya — a need that was intensified by Kenya's decision to send its troops to Somalia to root-out Al-Shabaab from its key bases in October 2011. The plans begun in mid-2013, after Godane had [eliminated](#) key figures within Al-Shabaab's *Shura* (Executive Council) that had opposed his vision of turning Al-Shabaab from an essentially Somali movement into a transnational Islamist threat.

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Godane took matters into his own hands, by bypassing the

network of Kenyan Al-Shabaab members, he went ahead and [tasked] key figures within Al-Shabaab's special operations and intelligence branch known as *Amniyaat* to begin planning operations against Kenya. At midday on 21 September 2013, 4 militants under the command of *Amniyaat* stormed Nairobi's upscale shopping centre, [Westgate], lobbing grenades and firing indiscriminately at shoppers. The subsequent siege lasted 80 hours and resulted in at least 67 deaths.

Following Westgate, Godane [ordered] a reorganisation of Al-Shabaab's military wing, *Jaysh al-Usra*. The commander in the Lower and Middle Juba regions, [Mohamed Kunow Dulyadeyn], a Kenyan-Somali from Garissa, began expanding his operations into Garissa and Wajir while Adan Garar, his counterpart in the Gedo region, expanded into Mandera. While this meant that attacks in Northeast Kenya would intensify from 2013 onwards, the leadership vacuum that was left by the 2011-2014 purge of Kenyan Al-Shabaab members had created a problem.

In Nairobi, Mombasa, Isiolo and Marsabit, where radical preachers and their militant followers had exercised some control, before suspected agents of the state killed most of them, a storm was brewing. At the Masjid Musa in Mombasa, the radicalised and violent followers of Rogo and Makaburi were growing ever more impatient, keen on proving their worth to Al-Shabaab's core leadership in Somalia. In fact, a criminal [gang] formed around the leadership of a protégé of the late Makaburi called [Ramadhan Kufungwa], a Digo from Ukunda in the South Coast. According to the police, Kufungwa ordered the gang to conduct a spate of robberies and killings of police and suspected police informers in Mombasa in 2014-2015.

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One of the gang's members was a Tuk-Tuk driver and high-school drop-out called [Mahir Khalid Riziki](#), who ended his life in a suicide mission at the DusitD2 attack, but was then a resident of Bondeni, a seedy rundown neighbourhood in Mombasa, and a sad reminder of its glorious past. Mahir and his friends immediately found themselves on the police radar. Using networks cultivated by Kufungwa, most of them made their way into an Al-Shabaab hide-out in the Boni forest, where a new unit called *Jaysh Ayman* (named after its first commander), had been formed in 2014 under the leadership of another former resident of Bondeni, [Luqman Osman Issa](#).

Jaysh Ayman brought together Al-Shabaab fighters from Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya, and was part of Godane's plan to turn Al-Shabaab into a potent regional force. In June-July 2014, *Jaysh Ayman* targeted the mainland areas of Lamu County, parts of which are covered by the Boni forest, where they killed close to 97 people in a rampage that shocked the nation and therefore, bolstered Al-Shabaab's reputation for daring attacks and spectacular violence. Despite the death of most of its early leadership during an attack at a military camp within the Boni forest in June 2015, the unit has remained a potent threat to Kenya's national security. By the time Gichunge and Mahir joined the unit, the Kenyan contingent of Al-Shabaab militants was larger, and better trained, and featured amongst its ranks, both the educated and uneducated, including petty criminals, [drug addicts and HIV positive-persons](#). It is these militants that Al-Shabaab is now sending to Kenya as suicide-bombers and attackers.

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Still the question remains: why does Al-Shabaab target Kenya?

Trans-border attacks as propaganda by deed

Despite the claim that Al-Shabaab targets Kenya due to its passion for [global jihad](#) and to pressure the Kenyan government to remove its troops from Somalia, the [evidence](#) suggests that Al-Shabaab is driven by different strategic concerns and highly rational reasons. Granted, there has been an uptick in Al-Shabaab attacks in Kenya since October 2011, when Kenya sent its troops to Somalia, but Al-Shabaab attacks in Kenya go back to May 2008, when a police post in Liboi (a few kilometres from the Somali border) came under fire. Jermaine Grant, who had been held in the post after he was arrested on his way to Somalia to join Al-Shabaab, was freed during the attack.

The [Global Terrorism Database](#) (GTD) recorded 14 more attacks before September 2011, and then 49 in 2012, 35, in 2013, 80 in 2014, 42 in 2015, and 45 in 2016. While the GTD is yet to provide figures from 2017, existing [evidence](#) shows that of the 302 trans-border attacks perpetrated by Al-Shabaab from 2008-2016, 3 occurred in Ethiopia, 5 in Uganda, 2 in Djibouti and 291 in Kenya. Brendon Cannon and Dominic Pkalya, in a recent [article](#), have argued that beyond sharing a border with Somalia, Al-Shabaab targets Kenya more than other frontline states because of the opportunity spaces linked to Kenya's international status and visibility, its relative free and independent media that widely publicizes terrorist attacks, a highly developed and lucrative tourism sector that provides soft targets, expanding democratic space and high levels of corruption. In sum, these variables play into Al-Shabaab's motivations and aid planning and execution of acts that aim to fulfil the group's quest to survive — as it losses more ground in Somalia — by maintaining its relevance on the global stage.

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The Westgate, Lamu, Garissa University College, and DusitD2

attacks are all examples of [attacks of maximum effect](), because they garnered Al-Shabaab international headlines and catapulted it back to the centre of debate amongst counterterrorism practitioners and policymakers. This visibility serves to attract the attention of terrorist financiers, potential recruits and allies. As argued by Cannon and Pkalya, Kenya offers an array of convenient targets to Al-Shabaab that result in relevance through the regional and international publicity of propaganda by deed that is usually desired by terrorist groups.

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With the sizeable contingent of Kenyan militants that Al-Shabaab now controls, it is probably a matter of when, not if, Al-Shabaab will stage another attack in the country. In this way, more needs to be done to scale-up counter-terrorism efforts, especially in border security and intelligence gathering, as more support is given to prevention strategies at the communal and individual level so as to counter radicalisation.