

Nairobi Westgate Mall Attack Death Toll Continues to Rise as FBI Deploys Agents to Kenya

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The death toll from last Saturday's attack on Nairobi's Westgate mall by members of Somalia's Al Shabab militia has risen to at least 72, with dozens more reported missing. The attack was launched by a unit of 10 to 15 Al Shabab fighters who took more than 100 hostages, executing dozens during an extended siege lasting into this week.

Al Shabab said it targeted the mall in retaliation for the ongoing, US-backed Kenyan intervention in Somalia. Westgate is a luxury mall, frequented by members of the Kenyan ruling elite as well as wealthy individuals from around the world, and which is partially Israeli-owned.

Authorities in Nairobi said they are bracing for scores of new casualties once rubble is cleared from a large portion of the mall, which collapsed during the assault. The cause of the collapse remains unclear.

Inside Nairobi's Somali community, which fears ethnic retribution for the attack, there are rising accusations that Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta's government is engaged in a cover-up. One resident of Nairobi's Little Mogadishu told the *Guardian*: "This is a cover-up motivated by politics. I don't trust the authorities—I think they exploded everything in Westgate to destroy the evidence."

A growing body of evidence suggests that the attack was part of a broader series of operations in Kenya and the region by Al Shabab or other Al Qaeda-linked forces internationally. It was apparently meticulously planned.

There was a remarkable level of preparation and prior internal penetration of the Westgate mall by the Al Shabab fighters before the attack. Kenyan officials have reported that heavy machine guns were smuggled into the mall in the week before the attack, with the collaboration of at least one employee. Reports have even surfaced that the attackers were renting a store at the mall as part of the plot.

Kenya has also been hit by two other deadly attacks, on Wednesday and yesterday, on police camps along the Kenya-Somalia border, killing three police officers.

Kenyan authorities also sought an Interpol international arrest warrant against a British citizen, Samantha Lewthwaite—the so-called "White Widow" of one of the suicide bombers who attacked London on July 7, 2005. There have been repeated reports that she may have been one of the attackers.

She was reportedly living in South Africa prior to the attack, working as an IT specialist under the name Natalie Faye Webb. Kenyan officials claimed she escaped south into Tanzania after the latest attack.

It is unclear how she could have escaped, or how such personnel could have so thoroughly penetrated a prominent target such as the Westgate mall in advance of the attack.

US officials are warning that similar attacks may be in preparation against targets in the US. "You never know when a terrorist attack in a faraway place could be a harbinger of something that could strike at the United States," former Obama administration official Daniel Benjamin told the *New York Times*.

According to a *Times* report released Thursday evening, "US Sees Direct Threat in Attack at Kenya Mall," the FBI has deployed "dozens" of agents to Nairobi to investigate the scene.

While the US is pushing Kenya to attack Al Shabab and continue its occupation of Somalia, Al Qaeda-linked forces on the African continent have broadly received a major boost from the US and its allies since the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in 2011. NATO's ground troops against Gaddafi during the Libyan war were largely drawn from Islamist militias, or groups like the Libya Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG).

The large shipments of arms and cash provided by the US and its allies to Al Qaeda-linked opposition militias in Syria and Libya appear to be improving Al Qaeda's operational capacity across the Middle East and Africa.

The possibility cannot be discounted that the Nairobi attack was blowback in response to the postponement of a US war against Syria in support of Al Qaeda forces fighting the Syrian regime.

While Al Shabab surfaced in 2006 as a Somali Islamist militia emerging from the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), its leadership is increasingly drawn from foreign fighters alleged to have experience in Al Qaeda circles. The top security and training chief for Al Shabab is a Pakistani man (Abu Musa Mombasa), the top financier is Saudi (Sheik Mohammed Abu Faid), and the chief recruiter is Sudanese (Mahmoud Mujajir).

The rank and file of Al Shabab, on the other hand, is composed of youth from Somalia, Kenya, and other East African countries, with media reports placing the militia's numbers between 5,000 and 15,000. A smaller contingent of fighters recruited from the United States and Europe is also present in the ranks. Youth recruited into the ranks of Al Shabab are drawn from areas where social conditions are ruinous and economic opportunities nonexistent. Many are forcibly conscripted.

Al Shabab is being increasingly integrated into the financial and logistical circuits which sustain other Al Qaeda affiliates throughout North Africa and the Middle East.

In an analysis from 2010, titled "Al Qaeda Veterans Now Run Al Shabaab Militia," Murithi Mutiga wrote, "Foreign jihadists have overrun the Somali nationals previously in charge of Al Shabaab, a development blamed for the movement's new posture as an exporter of terrorism and a threat to stability in East Africa and beyond. The Islamists, mostly veterans of the Al Qaeda training camps of Afghanistan, now control the movement's policy making organs and were directly responsible for ordering the Kampala bombings which announced the Al Shabaab's arrival as an actor with a reach that extends beyond Somali territory."

The Westgate operation represents a significant blow to US imperialism's strategy in the region. The US has repeatedly encouraged invasions of Somalia by Ethiopian and Kenyan forces, backing major incursions in 2006 and 2011, and has devoted massive military resources to securing American domination over the strategically crucial Horn of Africa.

These wars are cited by Al Shabab as the source of its grievances against the Kenyan government and its American patrons.

Responding to the attack in a statement Tuesday, Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta said that he will continue waging the "war on terror" in Somalia, saying that Kenyan security forces "ashamed and defeated our attackers."

The Westgate attack is also a blow to the Kenyan regime, however, which presides over an economy heavily based on tourism. Kenyan government statistics show that tens of thousands of US citizens travel to Kenya every year for tourism.

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