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Shootout at Nairobi's Shopping Mall: A Harbinger of Things to Come?

By Ahmed S. Hashim

Synopsis

The surprise attack by Al-Shabaab on the Westgate Mall in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi marks a new threat that terrorism poses to shopping centres around the world. Can security for such commercial places be increased without high cost?

Commentary

SOME 70 SHOPPERS were killed in a deadly terrorist attack claimed by the militant Somali Islamist group Al-Shabaab at Nairobi's up-scale Westgate Mall on Saturday, 21 September 2013. The ferocity of the attackers was seen when they took hundreds of people hostage and held out against a massive counter-attack by Kenyan government forces for three days. Amid explosions and intense barrage of fire, the Kenyan security authorities said the siege ended on Tuesday 24 September, though Al-Shabaab disputed this.

The surprise attack put paid to any thought that the Somali group has been extinguished after a mauling by government forces in neighbouring Somalia where Al-Shabaab originated. It was barely two years ago that people were writing the obituary of Al-Shabaab which had seized power in Somalia several years ago.

A resurgent Al-Shabaab?

In August 2011 the Somali president declared an end to the group following its ignominious retreat from the capital Mogadishu after a government counter-offensive. However, on 4 October 2012 the group proved that it could still threaten the stability of the fragile Transitional Federal Government in Somalia when it killed more than 100 people in a suicide attack. The official spokesperson of Al-Shabaab, Ali Mohammad Rage, promised more of the same against the movement's enemies.

In June 2013, the group attacked the United Nations compound in Mogadishu killing 15 people. Then last weekend it attacked the Westgate Mall in Nairobi. Two squads of Al-Shabaab members entered the shopping centre, which is a favourite haunt of UN officials, families, and diplomatic staff around midday on a busy weekend shopping day. They threw grenades randomly and fired automatic weapons, sending panic-stricken shoppers fleeing in all directions. Less than 24 hours later the death toll was approximately 70 people of all nationalities and 175 people injured.

Why Kenya?

Kenya is a soft target for terrorists. It borders five neighbours all of which have ineffective border enforcement forces and measures. Home to a large refugee population, its corrupt and understaffed Immigration Department has traditionally been unable to effectively police the presence of foreigners – both legal and illegal – within the country. Kenya has a long and largely unmonitored coastline which it does not have maritime capabilities to effectively police. Kenya has a relatively extensive and quite effective communications network making it a transportation hub in East Africa. Tourism is a main driver of the economy and accounts for roughly 25% of Gross Domestic Product. It has cooperated with the United States against militant Islamist movements in the region.

Kenya has suffered from terrorism in the past including the notorious Al-Qaeda attacks on the United States Embassy in 1998 which killed 217 people of whom 12 were United States citizens and an attempt in 2002 to bring down an Israeli airliner taking off from Mombassa airport. More specifically this East African country has become a target of retaliation by the Somali group because of the presence of several thousand Kenyan troops in southern Somalia as part of an African peace-keeping force sent there to restore law and order and to stamp out extremist movements such as Al-Shabaab.

For at least two reasons, it took a long time for the Kenyan government to acknowledge that it had a terrorist problem. The first is the sensitivity of the issue, given that it had a large Muslim population -approximately 12% of the total population - which would feel itself the target of any new counter-terrorism strategy. It is also a sensitive issue in light of the perceived Muslim sense of marginalisation and growing religious tensions between the Christian majority and Muslim minority. Secondly, the authorities knew that the implementation of active counter-terrorism measures would reveal the embarrassing structural weaknesses in intelligence-capabilities and the steady erosion of Kenyan law enforcement and security services over the years due to lack of funding.

Nonetheless, the threat could not be ignored and the Kenyan government set up counter-terrorism protocols and emergency procedures with foreign aid. It is not clear, however, that the authorities in that country expected malls to be targets.

Malls/shopping centres as targets

The attack on the mall is a milestone event and highlights the vulnerabilities of such structures. Shopping centres are particularly vulnerable to terrorist attacks because of the easy access to them with multiple points of entry and exit, unsecured parking lots, the labyrinth nature of the inside of a mall which official security forces and law enforcement are not necessarily familiar with, the often poor training of under-staffed mall security personnel, and dense concentrations of shoppers. Since 1998 over 60 terrorist attacks have occurred at shopping centres throughout the world.

Malls across the world have less stringent security procedures or protocols in place for dealing with terrorist attacks than airports, hotels, or government facilities. Governments around the world are now going to take a closer look at the security protocols of their malls. Shopping centres/malls, particularly high-end prestigious ones, are symbols of economic vitality, they are gathering places for the public especially on week-ends, and they are soft targets.

The Westgate Mall attack clearly demonstrates the need for security forces to have training for fighting hostage-seizing terrorists in an environment in which hostages can easily become casualties. The terrorists' success in Nairobi in executing their operation and holding on for a lengthy period will, undoubtedly, encourage other groups to emulate them. The Westgate incident shows that it requires considerable planning and command and control coordination on the part of law enforcement and security forces to conduct an operation to clear terrorists deeply ensconced within such a structure.

Unfortunately, whatever measures are introduced to improve the security of malls – including security guards and barriers at the entrance to the parking lots; vehicular searches and metal detection barriers at the various doors into the building itself; and better trained security forces - will all increase the cost and inconvenience for the public.

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