



# TERRORISM: Officialdom's baffling silence in the wake of Sylvia Romano's abduction

By Andrew Franklin



Ms Sylvia Constanca Romano, a twenty-three year-old Italian NGO worker, was abducted on Tuesday, November 20, 2018 at 8 pm from her lodging in the remote trading centre of Chakama, located 80 km west of the Kenyan Indian Ocean resort town of Malindi in Kilifi County. Ms Romano was managing a children's home for the Italian NGO, African Milele Onlus, and the armed men who took her were identified as being of Somali origin.

Weeks later, this Italian woman is still missing and while not immediately dismissing the involvement of Al Shabaab, the Government of Kenya is still resisting suggestions that the kidnappers were terrorists rather than ordinary thugs carrying AK-47s. Although initial reports in the Italian media were quick to blame Al Shabaab, the Italian Government just as rapidly asserted that the kidnappers were "armed herders" although, as quoted in the local media, fears were expressed that Ms Romano might have been sold on to Al Shabaab elements inside Somalia.

Italy was the preeminent colonial power in the Horn of Africa, especially in what is today effectively the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) territory, which is currently being contested by jihadists. Italy contributes paramilitary police advisors to the nine-nation European Union Mission to FGS and has trained the Somalia Government police at its base in Djibouti; Italian Navy elements have participated in anti-piracy patrols off Somalia since 2008.

In October 2018, Al Shabaab in Mogadishu targeted a convoy of Italian security personnel returning to their base with a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (IED). Although there were no Italian casualties, this attack on foreigners is not Shabaab's modus operandi; the main targets of the terrorist organisation's operations within Somalia have mainly been Somalis, although neighbouring Kenya has been a target since Operation Linda Nchi – the Kenyan Defence Forces (KDF) incursion into Somalia in October 2011. Some of the most deadly Al Shabaab attacks on Kenyan soil include the Westgate mall attack in Nairobi in September 2013 in which 67 people lost their lives and the Garissa University College massacre in April 2015, in which 147 students were brutally gunned down.

Elsewhere in the region, the Kenya Police recently took delivery of four Italian-made utility helicopters for use in its operations domestically against terrorists. Italy's continuing role in the war on terror within the region remains low key and its government prefers to keep it that way.

It has been confirmed that at least three of the attackers had arrived in Chakama several days earlier and had rented lodgings and apparently observed village routines, including Ms Romano's activities. Initial reports were that five heavily armed assailants had shot wildly during the Tuesday evening attack, wounding five Kenyans before seizing the Italian; there has yet to be an explanation for the origin of AK-47s or when they were smuggled into the trading centre. According to the police, the attackers fled with their hostage using two subsequently abandoned motorbikes before crossing a major river and disappearing into a rather thick bush.

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There is no permanent police presence in Chakama, which is located in a remote area of Kilifi County. It seems that there was no organised security forces' response during the first 24 hours following the abduction. The security forces' operating capabilities during the hours of darkness cannot be evaluated except for certain elite units (i.e. General Service Unit [GSU] Recon and KDF Rangers and Special Forces). Regular police and Administration Police (AP) units, regardless of designation, are not trained, organised or equipped for extensive patrolling. Although police helicopters were deployed to the area, it's unlikely that the hastily cobbled together rescue force, comprising Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) Game Rangers, KDF troops, GSU, APs and regular police, had the ability to coordinate ground forces with air support.

In fact, in the event that this was an Al Shabaab operation, the seeming reticence on the part of the security forces is understandable as it would be expected that Al Shabaab would plant IEDs and organise ambushes to slow down pursuit and inflict maximum damage on the rescuers. This is standard procedure and characteristic of all guerrillas fighting road-bound conventional forces; since 2016 Al Shabaab has been regularly ambushing KDF and/or police patrols across all five frontline counties in Kenya. Another foreseeable risk is that Al Shabaab will attempt to shoot down a police helicopter, as was reported on 2 September in the vicinity of Boni Forest in Lamu County.

Although remaining somewhat tight-lipped about the actual affiliation of the attackers, the expansion of search activities [outside Kilifi County](#) into neighbouring Lamu, specifically into Boni Forest, which straddles the Kenya-Somalia border, and the issuance of "WANTED" posters for [three men of ethnic Somali origin](#) – albeit without specific background details – point to officials believing

this to have been an Al Shabaab terrorist operation. Since the kidnapping, the Kenya Police have taken more than twenty civilians in and around Chakamba into custody for questioning; the wife and brother-in-law of one of the three named suspects were arrested in Garsen in Tana River County when a telephone call was intercepted and traced back. As with the previously noted lack of explanation regarding the presence of AK-47s in Chakamba, there was no information provided as to whether the security forces were able to trace the GPS signatures of the suspects; Al Shabaab operatives would no doubt discard their phones to avoid detection. Perhaps these men are part-time insurgents or even freelancers?

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### **Operation Linda Nchi and its after-effects**

Operation Linda Nchi, a cross-border punitive expedition by 1,800 KDF troops, was launched on 15 October 2011 ostensibly in retaliation for alleged Al Shabaab kidnappings of Spanish MSF workers from the Dadaab refugee camp and tourists from Manda Island in Lamu. The latter attacks were eventually found to be the work of common criminals based in Ras Kamboni where pro-FGS forces hold sway. Al Shabaab's involvement in the kidnapping of the Spanish volunteers was neither confirmed nor denied. Anecdotal evidence, however, indicates that the kidnappings within Somalia of locals has been used to raise funds not only by criminals but also by Al Shabaab, which has long made money from participating in transnational organised criminal activities, including charcoal smuggling, arms dealing, human trafficking and trade in illicit narcotics.

Al Shabaab attacks have taken place fairly regularly across the five Kenyan counties bordering Somalia, whose populations are overwhelmingly Muslim and predominately of ethnic Somali origin. Although Al Shabaab has eschewed headline-grabbing terror attacks, such as that on the Westgate mall in September 2013, its fighters regularly target police and KDF patrols, permanent security force bases, mobile telephone masts and power stations. Occasionally they also take control of villages and harangue inhabitants at night with little or no government interference. In June 2016, for instance, Al Shabaab took control of the villages of Mpeketoni and Poromoko in Lamu County and killed 60 men. The security response to this attack was dismal; there were stories of police stations in Mpeketoni being abandoned prior to the attack and villagers being left to their own devices to deal with the terrorists.

Since 2016, most professional security analysts agree that the Al Shabaab attacks have derailed devolution in the frontline counties of Mandera, Wajir, Garissa, Lamu and Tana River by severing the people from administrative functions. The attacks have throttled formal economic activities and disrupted delivery of education and social and health services. Civil servants, teachers, traders and students from outside these counties fear returning there after an attack. Most of the students who survived the Garissa University College attack, for example, were relocated to campuses in other parts of the country. Many teachers have also refused to be sent to these counties for fear of being attacked by Al Shabaab. These attacks have effectively normalised a state of endemic insecurity within which police elements and KDF units are alienated from the local citizens, many of whom are not convinced that they are truly citizens of the Republic of Kenya as their regions have been systematically marginalised and neglected since independence in 1963.

Despite attempts by all parties in Nairobi to portray events in Garissa, Tana River, Mandera, Wajir and Lamu counties as merely episodic terrorism that can happen anywhere in the world, the reality is that Al Shabaab insurgents are conducting a reasonably successful, low-intensity conflict that complements its operations to defeat the Western-backed FGS based in Mogadishu. In fact, the KDF invasion of Somalia and its subsequent incorporation into the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) inadvertently provided Al Shabaab opportunities to subvert the Kenyan government's influences across the restive predominantly ethnic Somali counties, to expand recruitment, to increase revenue from transnational crime and to undermine the morale of a major troop-contributing country. Kenya, out of all the states adjacent to Somalia or involved in AMISOM, has been shown to have the most fragile domestic security architecture amidst a fractious political environment in which little or no attention is paid to matters of national insecurity.

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The abduction of an Italian NGO worker from a remote market centre in Kilifi County, which is outside of Al Shabaab's normal area of operations, had to have been well-researched and carefully planned. Nearly all Western states have prohibited their officials from working within the five frontline counties and tourists have been actively discouraged from visiting even popular resorts on Lamu Island. Travel advisories issued since 2012 have crippled Kenya's tourism sectors, especially along the Coast in Malindi, Watamu, Kilifi and the beaches north of Mombasa; however foreigners like Sylvia Romano would not really have been warned off by their governments and are now the best targets available to Al Shabaab and/or disparate armed groups, including livestock raiders and poachers.

Western governments have pretty much placed most of the five frontline counties off limits to their employees and strongly discouraged their citizens from visiting them for any purposes. Al Shabaab has been very active in mainland Lamu County, which resulted in foreigners being discouraged from visiting popular locations on Lamu Island and adjoining islands. Although the UK lifted its travel advisory in May 2017, the position of the US Government and others remains oddly ambiguous.

However, Al Shabaab is considered one of the most dangerous of Al Qaeda's global franchises; Al Qaeda cells blew up US Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam on 7 August 1998 and the terrorist organisation launched a suicide bomber against the Israeli owned Paradise Hotel in Kikambala in 2002. Simultaneously, Al Qaeda operatives unsuccessfully attempted to shoot down an El Al charter flight taking off from Mombasa. Al Qaeda has never backed away from threats to retaliate against citizens of enemy nations wherever they are located and it seems likely that Al Shabaab will expand activities wherever targets can be found.

### **The Italian connection**

There are nearly 15,000 Italian citizens living in Malindi, Watamu and elsewhere on the Kenyan coast. The Italian government operates an official satellite tracking/space research facility just north of Malindi. During the pending festive season, hundreds more Italians will descend on an otherwise depressed holiday destination. In my view, Al Shabaab is implicitly threatening the safety of these people in order to leverage the Italian government to reduce its footprint in Mogadishu.

As with the kidnappings of foreigners in 2011, whether Al Shabaab fails to take responsibility or is ultimately found not to be culpable is less important than popular perception. The longer Sylvia Constanca Romano remains unfound, the greater the possibility that media attention, particularly in Italy, will speculate on whether Al Shabaab is involved and whether there is a link between the Italian government's counterterrorism activities against Al Qaeda/Al Shabaab and her abduction.

Although the Chakamba market centre is several kilometres away from major Indian Ocean tourist towns, it is located in an area traversed by foreigners visiting Kenya for luxury safaris – the very same bush into which the Italian woman's abductors fled. Whether this incident is the start of a high season offensive intended by Al Shabaab to further undermine the economy of Kilifi County cannot be ruled out. Doing so would further undermine support by the Kenyan public, especially at the coast, for KDF's continued deployment to AMISOM, particularly if Italian security assistance to FGS is seen to falter.

So far, Nairobi's Western allies have not extended stringent travel advisories outside of the five frontline counties but it can be expected that an unhappy outcome of yet another botched Government of Kenya anti-terrorist operation will impact negatively on economies of already shell-shocked coastal counties where there are strong undercurrents of opinion favouring self-determination and even secession.

Regardless of how this unfortunate incident plays out, the fact of its occurrence indicates that expert advice concerning best practices to respond to cross-border and even domestic attacks of this type have been ignored for more than seven years. The initial reaction to the news of the kidnapping followed the same old script in which personnel from different security forces were thrown together without appropriate training and organisation to track a small gang through unfamiliar terrain during the hours of darkness. Reports that police were detaining witnesses may mask employment by security personnel of heavy-handed and counterproductive methods, which have been the trademark of government forces since before independence in 1963.

It is notable, however, that the Kenyan government has successfully controlled the flow of information although it has to date set the narrative by avoiding any narrative. In this, the authorities have been aided by a seemingly disinterested and largely uninformed domestic media. Kenya's mainstream press has avoided anything suggesting that the government's war on terror, whether at home or in the near abroad, is less than a reasonable success under the circumstances. Local and international media have excluded security professionals who can document how officialdom has perversely ignored practical, common sense solutions to the myriad security issues that have evolved into a comprehensive existential threat to national security.

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The potential significance of this kidnapping has already been pushed into the background; will this be yet another wake-up call to be ignored?

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