



# Northeastern Kenya: Theatre of Al-Shabaab Operations

By Abdullahi Abdille Shahow



In early January this year, Mandera Governor Ali Roba raised concerns over the worsening security situation in his county, saying that Kenya's security personnel have failed to secure the county and abandoned it to Al-Shabaab.

In an [opinion piece](#) in the *Standard*, the governor claimed, "Al-Shabaab manages more than 60 per cent of Mandera with the will of the public suppressed by terror". In its [response](#), the Ministry of the Interior was quick to downplay the concerns of the governor.

As the 10th anniversary of Kenya's military intervention in Somalia approaches, it is appropriate to assess the situation and its impact on the three northeastern counties of Garissa, Wajir and Mandera.

There is limited media coverage of Northern Kenya, with mainstream media sending very few correspondents to the region. As a result, many Kenyans are unaware of the insecurity in the region and the impact it has had on the people.

## Al Shabaab's attacks

Al-Shabaab launched retaliatory attacks against Kenya immediately after Kenya's Defence Forces

entered Southern Somalia to dislodge the militants; the government linked initial cross-border incidents involving [kidnappings of tourists and aid workers](#) to the Somalia-based group. However, what the Kenyan leadership had not carefully considered before crossing into Somalia was what a military intervention inside Somalia would mean for stability in the homeland.

Kenya has never been involved in a military intervention in any country outside peacekeeping operations within the framework of the United Nations. In sending its military to Somalia, Kenya did not foresee the devastating impact retaliatory Al-Shabaab attacks would have on Kenya's stability and domestic security. It also did not carefully consider the competencies and the ability of Kenyan security agencies to stop Al-Shabaab attacks inside Kenya .

Kenya has since 2011 experienced hundreds of attacks attributed to Al-Shabaab inside its territory, including in major cities like Mombasa and Nairobi. Some of these attacks — such as the [September 2013 Westgate attack](#) and the January 2019 [Dusit D2 complex attack](#) — were devastating. They attracted a lot of attention as they took place in the capital city. But it is in the northeastern region, in the three counties of Garissa, Wajir and Mandera, where the Al-Shabaab has concentrated its actions, killing hundreds of civilians and security forces in the hundreds of attacks that have occurred to date.

Terror attacks in the region involve attacks against government security forces, civilians, infrastructure, and poorly defended government outposts. The group operates with relative impunity, conducting attacks almost at will and at the time and place of its choosing. It is partly helped by — and exploits — Kenya's long, largely uncontrolled porous border with Somalia. The northeast is vast, with little government presence and lots of ungoverned space.

### **Impact of attacks**

Al Shabaab attacks have had [profound adverse effects](#) on the population, disrupting everyday life, affecting livelihoods and deepening the socio-economic woes of one of the most underdeveloped regions in Kenya. The death toll has been heavy for both civilians and security personnel. The Kenya Police Service in particular has suffered heavy casualties; other than the specialised police units, ordinary service members are not sufficiently well armed to confront the enemy.

Al-Shabaab are much better armed because, other than AK47 Kalashnikovs, the militants are also armed with rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and machine guns. Ordinary Kenyan police are mostly armed with AK47s or G3 guns.

Another reason why the police have suffered heavy casualties and have become the primary victims of Al-Shabaab attacks is because they are dispersed across the region and must defend remote outposts, at times in small numbers.

Al-Shabaab intends to isolate the northeastern region, cut it off from the rest of Kenya and turn it into an ungovernable space. There are three areas of operation, one in each of the three counties mentioned above, where the group has a presence and has deployed fighters.

### **Al-Shabaab areas of operation**

Kenyan security agencies seem unable to root out the group from these areas altogether. The three areas have in common that they are all close to the border with Somalia, which gives Al-Shabaab the advantage of quickly retreating into Somalia whenever it comes under pressure. Also, in these areas, Al-Shabaab has an extra edge. It has a significant presence and controls towns and villages inside Somalia close to the Kenyan border.

The hotspots in Garissa are in the southern parts of the county around Ijara, Masalani and Hulugho. Like in Lamu County, these areas are close to the Boni Forest enclave where the group has deployed fighters and set up bases.

In Mandera, the hotspots are around Arabia, Lafey and Elwak, which is infamous for some of the deadliest attacks in the region such as the two attacks in November 2014 — a bus attack in which 28 people were killed, most of them teachers, and the attacks on quarry workers which left 38 dead. In March this year, a civilian bus that had left Lafey en route to Mandera town [was targeted](#) by an IED planted in the road. The attack killed at least three civilians and injured 10.

In Wajir, Al-Shabaab activities are concentrated in Tarbaj constituency and the areas around Kutulo, Konton, and Qorof Harar. The Wajir area is connected to and is an extension of the Mandera area of operations. Al Shabaab deploys fighters into the area from the Gedo region of Somalia where it has a considerable presence and controls the adjacent towns and villages.

Al-Shabaab has an extra advantage in that it has a considerable presence and controls towns and villages inside Somalia that are close to the Kenyan border.

The militant group operates with relative impunity in these hotspots, crossing in and out of Kenya almost at will. The government security apparatus is unable to contain them and residents have been left to their own devices. Occasionally, the group will occupy villages for hours, assemble residents in one place, and preach to them, disparaging the Kenyan government. Local government administrators (chiefs) have abandoned their locations and increasingly operate from larger towns where they feel safe. Whenever security forces venture into these areas or try to patrol them, their vehicles are ambushed and attacked with IEDs.

Government services and development projects have stalled. Schools cannot operate normally. New roads cannot be built and old ones cannot be upgraded; generally, development projects cannot go ahead unimpeded and government officials at the county or national level do not have unfettered access. In the last few years the group has destroyed dozens of Safaricom masts in these areas, leaving villages and towns without network coverage.

## **Consequences**

One other devastating impact of the Al-Shabab campaign in the region is the departure of many skilled professionals from the area. The northeastern region depends heavily on a skilled workforce — doctors, engineers, teachers, and many others — from outside the region. Fearing for their lives, many have left the area, deepening the woes of an already impoverished region.

Teachers have been most affected, leaving the region in at least three large droves in the last decade, each time in their hundreds. Due to a lack of teachers, many [schools have closed](#) and those which remain open operate below capacity, putting the education and the future of thousands of children in jeopardy. Since the ministry of education [banned national rankings](#) in 2014, accurate statistics are hard to come by. Schools in northeastern Kenya perform poorly when compared to the rest of the country. A list of [top 100 schools nationally](#) in the 2020 Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examination compiled by the Daily Nation did not include any school from northeastern Kenya. Fewer candidates from the three counties attain the grade C+ and above required for university admission in Kenya.

Travel by road in the troubled hotspots has become a risky affair. Buses and lorries travelling between Mandera and Nairobi use longer routes to escape armed attacks and roadside bombs. The

situation is the same for roads in southern Garissa, which have become risky to take for both government and civilian vehicles.

Occasionally, the group will occupy villages for hours, assembling residents in one place and preaching to them.

However, in the last two years, the group has become even more bold and daring. It does not limit itself to the traditional hotspots anymore, and its fighters have been making incursions deep into Kenyan territory, at times 150 to 200 kilometres inside the border. Its fighters have even attacked schools in the vicinity of Garissa town.

In Mandera, the group has expanded its presence along all the major highways in the county, rendering dangerous locations and roads that were previously considered safe. This is what elicited the outcry of Mandera Governor Ali Roba in January; he has been attacked twice in the past and is unable to move freely within the county. In May 2017, [his convoy of vehicles was attacked](#), and five security officers accompanying him, including his bodyguard, were killed.

### **State response**

The strategies put in place by the government and the security leadership to combat Al-Shabaab in the last decade have failed to produce results. The default government response to increased Al-Shabaab attacks in the region has been to deploy extra security forces, but the attacks have continued. The response has not been adequate, and it has failed to protect residents and stop cross-border incursions. Security forces are mainly on the defensive and not on the offensive. They do not pursue Al-Shabaab into their hideouts but instead wait for the group to attack them in their police posts or ambush them as they travel or go on patrol, placing IEDs on roads.

The security leadership blames the communities they are supposed to protect. They accuse them of “harbouring” terrorists and not supporting security operations. The local administration fails to understand that security is a state function, and that the state is supposed to protect communities, not harm them. The Kenyan state and its security agencies must secure the region and protect the citizens’ lives and property.

A good relationship between the security agencies and the communities is crucial in winning the fight. But it is the security agencies that are supposed to make this happen, not the communities. They are supposed to win the hearts and minds of the locals and closely work with the communities to defeat the enemy.

Governor Ali Roba has been attacked twice in the past and is unable to move freely within the county.

The population is caught between a merciless enemy that has desecrated their lives and livelihoods and a state security apparatus that is uncompromising, blaming the population of sympathising with Al-Shabaab, meting out collective punishment, and harassing and killing the locals that it is supposed to protect.

The community mistrusts state security agencies, a mistrust that is both contemporary and historical. In effect, the people of the northeastern region have a troubled history with the state, including a [secessionist conflict](#). Immediately after independence in 1963, ethnic Somalis backed by

the government of Somalia took up arms against the new Kenyan state to secede from Kenya and join Somalia. The conflict, known as the Shifta War, ended in November 1967 after the governments of Kenya and Somalia signed an agreement. The state and its security services have also perpetrated multiple massacres in the past, such as the Wagalla and Garissa massacres which are [well documented](#) in the 2013 Truth Justice and Reconciliation Commission report. Justice has never been served to the victims, and no reparations have been forthcoming.

Security agencies have continued to use repressive tactics in the fight against Al-Shabaab. Unable to contain the militant group, they have resorted to repressive means that do not help in the fight. Human rights abuses have been rampant in the last decade, and dozens have died in unexplained circumstances. Extrajudicial killings, torture, disappearances, and mistreatment of suspected terrorists at the hands of state security agencies have occurred and are well documented in [numerous reports](#) by human rights organisations, including in one by the state-funded [Kenya National Commission on Human Rights](#).

Human rights abuses have been rampant in the last decade and dozens have died in unexplained circumstances.

A decade after the KDF crossed into Somalia, and even as Al-Shabaab attacks have reduced in Nairobi, the militant group's actions in northeastern Kenya continue unabated; they operate with relative impunity in the region. Al Shabaab has decimated lives and livelihoods, hindered development and stymied crucial sectors such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure in an already impoverished area where these services are needed most.

The government has failed to secure the region, protect its citizens, and stop attacks inside Kenya. It is a time to change tack and do a reassessment, review what has worked and what has failed. You cannot win the fight by using a heavy-handed and repressive security response strategy alone. Law enforcement agencies need to be accountable, to serve the people and not harm them. If they are to win the fight, they need to build trust with the communities. Community engagement and community-led mechanisms are vital in defeating Al-Shabaab and scaling back its operations in northeastern Kenya.

---

*Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).*

*The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.*

*Follow us on [Twitter](#).*