

# Nairobi's Security Dragnet

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## Trapped: My Twelve-Hour Ordeal in DusitD2

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### Campus or Fortress? How Terrorism-inspired Security Checks Killed Public Discourse at Universities

A few years ago, I was in a matatu along Riverside Drive trying to get to town, but the evening traffic was unrelenting. I decided to get off the matatu and walk through the University of Nairobi's Chiromo Campus, thinking that this might be a quicker way of making it to town in time for my evening beer.

At the gate, the security guard asked for my ID, which I promptly produced.

"A student ID, I meant," he told me impatiently.

"I'm a former student, student leader no less. I just want to walk through to avoid this traffic," I told him politely.

"It is past 5 p.m. Non-students are not allowed in the university compound."

It was final. Unbelievable that a year earlier, anyone would walk through any

public university without security guards demanding their ID and wanting to know which part of the university they were going to. I humbly boarded another matatu with a bad FM radio station on and endured the traffic.

## **Garissa massacre: The watershed moment**

Sometime in 2012, when random terror attacks became the norm, buildings in the central business district, government facilities, shopping malls and other places likely to be targeted by Al Shabaab installed walk-through metal detectors. Those that could not afford the expensive apparatus bought cheap metal detectors and hired young men and women to man their buildings. Nobody knows how the detectors are supposed to stop marauding, gun-wielding murderers. (Having witnessed the Westgate mall attack in 2013 and the Dusit attack in 2019, we now know that they cannot stop terrorists.)

Around that time, there were messages that used to circulate on social media allegedly from Al Shabaab, outlining their targets, predictably the United Nations complex, government buildings, embassies of Western nations, shopping malls favoured by expatriates and the University of Nairobi.

Given the frequency of the attacks and their randomness, even the tough-headed University of Nairobi students grudgingly accepted the intrusive searches in the spirit of forestalling terror attacks. And any students who felt violated by the limitation of their liberties, the Garissa university attacks removed any doubt about the invulnerability of universities.

At dawn on Thursday, April 2, 2015, gunmen descended on Garissa University College and killed 148 students and injured another 79. It was the second deadliest terror attack since the 1998 Al Qaeda bombing of the US embassy in Nairobi that killed more than 200 people. The attack sent chills down our spines for its severity and cruelty.

After the Garissa massacre, universities became like military installations. Private security firm were deployed to man the gates and the buildings within universities. At the universities' main gates, security guards began searching cars and frisking students. Non-students must produce national IDs and explain what they are going to do at the university. They don't necessary keep these details, so you can cook up any excuse if you have ulterior motives. But the presence of the guards has definitely limited the foot traffic of the general public at universities.

Buildings that host the most important people within the university are now fortified, and senior university officials have security details that rival those of the President. I recently saw the Vice Chancellor of a top local university walking around the university. He had more than five bodyguards. The building where his office is located has no-nonsense security guards who ensure that they have taken your every detail before giving you the wrong directions to the office you need to go to. The apparatus and the many security guards who replicate their roles can give one a false sense of security.

In a way, the many security guards have made university less fun. Just a decade ago, when I was a student, the university was a free place for both students and the general public. If tired in town, you could walk to the university and rest on the seats or any of beautiful manicured lawns.

At the hostels, those from less fortunate backgrounds would host their relatives in their tiny rooms as they worked or went to college somewhere in Nairobi. Public universities had a comradely camaraderie regardless of the students' backgrounds; there was an egalitarianism, a sense of belonging. Public universities had a tinge of elitism, but they were equally accessible to the sons and daughters of peasants and of wealthy folk.

Also, the university was a place of ideas. Several public forums used to be held at universities. Thinkers, writers, foreign dignitaries, and local celebrities came and freely interacted with us. There was no payment or the signing of some Google-doc for you to attend an event.

I remember a time when the Ghanaian writer Ayi Kweyi Armah visited the University of Nairobi in the mid-2000s. Barack Obama also came to the university when he was a Senator for Illinois. So did Hillary Clinton when she was US Secretary of State. Joe Biden visited when he was the Vice President of the United States. I remember when Chimamanda Adichie was brought by Kwani? in its hey days in 2008, when her magnum opus, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, had just been re-published by Kwani? Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo also delivered public lectures at the university. These forums and the resultant public discourses made the university experience all the more exciting.

I remember a time when there were no restrictions to anyone who wanted to attend. But in the last few years, there have been fewer notable public forums at

the university. There have hardly been any new or controversial ideas on language, literature, politics, economics or philosophy that have been debated here in recent times. Universities have not provided an environment where we can contextualise what is going on in the country, the continent and the world.

There is no shortage of thinkers, philosophers and scholars whose works students should be exposed to, from Mahmood Mamdani to Achille Mbembe, Wandia Njoya, Stella Nyanzi, Kwame Antony Appiah, Evan Mwangi, Sylvia Tamale and Mshai Mwangola, among others. But you are more likely to encounter their minds in a civil society setting or other forums than at a university. Ironically, private universities that were citadels of the bourgeoisie have fared better in hosting these thinkers, who sometimes can be a thorn in the flesh of the ruling class and the bourgeoisie.

## **Symbols of segregation**

Security guards act as physical gatekeepers of free intercourse of ideas that should take place in universities. Security guards are a symbol of segregation. There is a reason a public university is protected and a public market like Muthurwa is not. And the nature of security searches is so subjective. There are places you can go in if you are driving a big car or wearing a suit. A young man with dreadlocks will have a lot of difficulties going into the same place.

Al Shabaab, like their counterparts Boko Haram, have contempt for Western education, which is why they target educational institutions. However, when these terror attacks began, universities had become commercial enterprises. Since university education became commercialised through self-sponsored programmes, universities began swimming in billions. It was, therefore, in their interest to ensure that Al Shabaab did not disrupt the business side of things. Remember, most self-sponsored students come from middle class or wealthy families. Hence their lives matter more. A visit to the hostels where regular students stay can reveal the amount of neglect and class divide in our institutions of higher learning. The influx of self-sponsored students meant that the already limited resources in universities were stretched beyond the limit.

Politics and corruption also had an impact on public forums that took place at universities. It is hard to host an anti-corruption activist with progressive ideas at a university that is embroiled in mega corruption scandals. It makes the

management very uncomfortable. Since the time of Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel arap Moi, opposition politicians and human rights activists have always been uninvited to universities, as university managements have tended to align themselves with the government. It is not uncommon to see a university Vice Chancellor groveling with a team of tribal leaders at State House. Their presumed intellectual autonomy is at the mercy of the powers that be. Funding can be cut because of any perceived misdeed. This is not fiction; most universities have had their budgets cut because of some misunderstanding with the Ministry of Education. You can't blame the management at times, since self-preservation is natural. Why host a talk on human rights of young men succumbing daily to extrajudicial killings and risk budget cuts when you can award a political bigwig with a dubious honorary degree to attract funding?

The upshot of this unwillingness on the part of universities to open their spaces for public discourses is that civil society organisations and the embassies of leading Western powers have taken over this role. The Goethe Institute, the Alliance Française and the British Council are doing what universities should be doing. This is not a bad thing in itself, as we need as many of these public forums as possible. However, with universities rarely hosting notable public events - save for entrepreneur forums where phony businessmen are allowed to sell their half-baked ideas anchored on neoliberalism - institutions of higher learning are losing much of their clout.

A local university erected a huge tower recently and the only events sanctioned to take place there are events that can bring money or improve the image of the university to the outside world. Its beautiful theatres cannot host the university's student travelling theatre group because literature is considered a lesser discipline than commerce (possibly the most useless discipline ever invented by universities, but the most lucrative).

Universities have robbed themselves the agency of owning ideas, and Kenyans now have to rely on Western institutional spaces (embassies or spaces funded by NGOs) to provide forums for the many needed discussions. Young minds in much need of intellectual nourishment beyond what is served in class are poorer for this.

Foreign institutions, for all their accessibility, are viewed by many as elite institutions, and some of us neither feel at home there nor free to express our

opinions as we would in a village *baraza*. You must adjust to certain dialectical expectations of the hosts.

## **The life of a security guard**

Security guards are the best symbol of inequality in Kenya. Kenya is one of the most unequal societies in the world. According to data from Oxfam (often debated upon), 8,300 (less than 0.1%) of the population own more wealth than the bottom 99.9%. The richest 10% earn on average 23 times more than the poorest 10%.

Security guards who work with security companies are among the poorest Kenyans. A casual conversation with them reveals that they mostly walk to work. (Some live in nearby slums that are always near the richer estates and communities.) A simple chat with them will show you how meaningless their job is. They survive on a meal day (usually dinner). The reason they try to strike a conversation and become familiar with the people they frisk daily is so they can get a tip that they can use to buy a packet of milk and a KDF (a pastry favoured by the poor). Most have to moonlight, washing cars parked in spaces they man or running some petty errands for an extra coin to augment their meagre earnings that defy common sense.

What's worse, the security companies fleece them - not only are they badly paid, the companies even deduct the cost of their own uniforms from their salaries. There is no transport allowance or transport provided by the company; most security guards walk for hours to get to work. Not even Francis Atwoli, the flamboyant Secretary General of the Central Organisation of Trade Unions (COTU), has stood up for their rights.

When you scrutinise their work, you will find that they are a symptom of a badly diseased nation. At universities they symbolise the breakdown of the flow of ideas from the university to the public sphere. Public lectures were called so because the public could attend, but presently the public is not invited to universities. There are other gatekeeping methods, such as email bookings and notices that only students can access. Security guards best represent the barrier that has been erected. And at universities, they exist to remind us whose interests universities now serve. They are there in the pretext of terrorism, but everyone knows they are badly underprepared should a gunman strike.

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It is the naiveté of the Kenyan elite that baffles me. We are all like the passengers on the Titanic. Privileged ones think they can escape the inefficiency of a government that has failed to provide basic services to the poor, from education to healthcare and security, by securing the services of private firms.

But if there is one thing that the Westgate, Dusit, Mpeketoni, Manderu and Garissa attacks have taught us, it is that a society only functions properly when the poorest and richest share the same privileges when it comes to basic services and public goods. Private schools and private hospitals will not fill the gaps in education and healthcare. Neither will private security companies fill the gaps in policing.

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## **Forget Al Shabaab, the Police Are the Real Terrorists in Kenya**

Listen. I don't know how to write this. What am I saying even? A few months ago, my friend and I were at the Maasai Mbili Art Collective in Kibera, and the folks there were talking about attending reggae concerts in the city. "*Hiyo siku walituangusha wengi. Mimi hizi form za reggae siendi tena.*" (That day they struck many of us down. I don't go for reggae concerts any more).

Listen. I don't know how to write about this conversation that troubled me greatly, this conversation about *kuangushwa* at night after reggae concerts, this conversation about how these people doing the felling are merciless. Instead, in its place, here's a story.

Once, there was a boy. The boy played football and disliked avocados and went to school.

In Kisumu, how many times did the boy join a crowd of people running away from police bullets?

How many times were the boy and his classmates, while in the middle of a lesson,

told to lie down on the corridors of their school, away from the windows, because of police bullets?

Listen. I don't know how to write this. Can you tell? Can you tell that I am struggling, *drowning*, to find the words, wrong or right, to say whatever it is I want to say?

Once, there was a group of children. The children were less than six years old, all in nursery school. One day, while they were in school, a group of police officers came into their school and tear-gassed the children.

This wielding of power like this and that on three-year-olds, on four-year-olds, on five-year-olds, is this not terrorism?

Actually, what is terrorism? My dictionary says, "Terrorism is the unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims."

So, these little kids, are they civilians?

In Kisumu, the main road running through the city, the road that divided the city neatly into two, used to be called Jomo Kenyatta Highway. Here's a story I heard. Do you know that one night, a group of people (or could it have been just one person?) rubbed off the words Jomo Kenyatta Highway so violently that from certain angles the words appeared to have been burned away? Now people call the road Bi Pendo Road. Samantha Pendo was a six-month-old infant bludgeoned to death in Kisumu by police on the night of August 10, 2017.

Is it a good thing that roads are named after babies killed because of terror, because violence was used against a civilian, against a baby almost too young to be a civilian, because some people somewhere were pursuing their political aims?

Then, the judiciary was told, "we shall revisit" by the president, but then hands were shaken, and this revisiting, me I don't know when it will happen.

I don't know many things. But sometimes I hear things. Did you hear about Caroline Mwatha, who was fighting for the victims of police violence in Dandora? *Ati* she died of an abortion. That's the statement. Anyway, what do we know? Trust, that's all we can do. We're told to trust the system. We are *wananchi* - children and heirs of the land.

I read that the Kenya Police was established by colonial governor Sir James Hayes Sandler in 1902, but didn't exist in its modern form until 1920 when Kenya became a colony. From the start, it was anti-African. The historian and journalist John Kamau describes it as "a tool for the settlers and administrators to enforce their will on Africans".

The Administration Police's mandate is a microcosm of this early anti-African attitude in Kenyan police work, seeing as when it was first established (it was known as the Native Police). Its mandate was to enforce the payment of taxes by the African populace, to control livestock movement, to provide forced labour for the coloniser, and to protect government installations. The village headmen stuffed the Native Police with local tough guys and bullies, *ma first body* as they would be called in Sheng, and these untrained recruits bullied the Africans into doing the things that the colonial administration wanted. Therefore, instead of protecting the locals and maintaining trust with them, the police force acquired a reputation as manifestations of the terror and violence of the colonial administration.

While one would have expected that the attitude of the police force would have changed with independence, it did not. Frantz Fanon writes, "The colonised man is an envious man. And this the settler knows very well; when their glances meet he ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive, 'They want to take our place.' It is true, for there is no native who does not dream of setting himself up in the settler's place."

Thus, since, rather than destroying the colonial system, what Kenyan leaders desired at independence was to replace the coloniser. So they saw no need to reform the police force, the very system that propped up the colonialist. Since then, Kenya's police and security forces have been used as weapons of terror against the "natives" by the country's administrators,

Another friend and I, at a sleepover at her house, talk about this. "The police is being anti-citizen? That seems to be a narrow premise," she argues. "I would lean towards them being pro-state, and in this country, that often means anti-citizen."

We were not just splitting definitional hairs. Her characterisation of the police being pro-state actually points out the irony of something we all know - that police officers are underpaid, have always been underpaid, are overworked, and

live in deplorable housing conditions. So why would they be strongly pro-state if raiding citizens was not the purpose of their existence?

A police force/service/whatever it is they insist on calling themselves ought to be pro-citizen, but this one of ours - where Kikuyu police officers are deployed in Nyanza, Luo police officers are stationed in Eldoret, Kigisigis police officers are sent to Mombasa and Mijikenda police officers work in Embu - is anything but. They are deployed in this way so that they don't form bonds with the civilians. When these bonds are formed, then the officers are transferred, especially immediately before elections when the administrators want to enact their little and big terrorisms on the native, and when we expect them to be so anti-citizen that we don't realise the wrongness in this. They are supposed to be serving you, not terrorising you.

If the police service/force/whatever name they insist on calling themselves is built on the premise of being pro-state and thus anti-citizen, do the sporadic acts of virtue performed by individual police officers even matter? These, my questions, me I don't know the answers, I don't know whether my answers are right or wrong, or even whether it is my questions that are wrong.

How do we write about terror? *Mimi sijui*. I don't know.

Instead, here is a list of attacks that Wikipedia classifies as the major terror incidents in Kenya:

1. Nairobi bombing, March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1975 - 30 people killed.
2. Norfolk bombing, December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1980 - 20 people killed.
3. United States Embassy bombing, August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1998 - 213 people killed.
4. Kikambala Hotel bombing, 28<sup>th</sup>, November 2002 - 13 people killed.
5. Westgate Mall shooting, 21<sup>st</sup> September 2013 - 67 people killed.
6. Mpeketoni attacks, 15<sup>th</sup> June - 17<sup>th</sup>, June 2014 - At least 70 people killed.
7. Garissa University attack, April 2015 -147 people killed
8. Dusit D2 Complex attack, 15<sup>th</sup> January 2019 - At least 21 people killed.

Who updates this list, I wonder. Whose job is it to add the grisly details of these deaths to this list? Don't they know about Wagalla, when the Kenya government

killed its own citizens in 1984? Here's what Wikipedia says about the death toll of Wagalla: "The exact number of people killed in the massacre is unknown. However, eyewitnesses place the figure at around 10,000 deaths."

Around ten thousand deaths, is that not terror? Or maybe because we read in the Bible that David killed tens of thousands so that's no longer terror? What is it called when one of the men who is said to have abetted (authorised?) the massacre in Wagalla is appointed the chairman of the commission to investigate the Wagalla massacre? His name was Bethuel Kiplagat. Is that what they call dramatic irony?

Listen, I'm not an expert in these things of terrorism, can you tell? I'm not an intellectual, I don't think solidly about these lofty things. Have you noticed that I'm quoting from Wikipedia? But here's a question my editor asks: Why does death by terrorism grip our psyche? Why does Al Shabaab frighten us so? Is it because it's a "globalised" death? Is it because vigils will be held and commissions of inquiry will be formed and presidents will make rousing statements about the country's unity? Is it because terrorism is viewed as that committed by the other, the foreign, so that whatever the nationality of the individuals involved in the attacks, Al Shabaab is a foreign group against which we must all stand together?

Me I don't know. Me I just hear things. Like how I heard that in Mathare, cops have their criminal networks, networks from which they eat, but that once in a while one of their superiors goes on TV and promises action, and then their bosses want action, and these same cops look for people to kill, people whose deaths will be action in the war against crime, and more importantly, people whose deaths will not threaten the networks that benefit these officers of the law.

On 28<sup>th</sup> February 2019, a community dialogue was held at the Kayole Social Hall. Organised by the Kayole Community Justice Centre, in collaboration with the Social Justice Centre Working Group, the dialogue aimed at addressing criminality and police brutality. The dialogue was a follow-up to the Machozi Ya Jana community dialogues held in Kibera, Kawangware, Korogocho, Mukuru, Mathare, Njiu and Dandora in 2017. I sit in my house and follow the #KayoleDialogue hashtag on twitter. The Director of Public Prosecutions, Noordin Haji, and the Directorate of Criminal Investigations boss, George Kinoti, are speakers at the forum. Question: Of the 123 people killed by the police in the

2008 post-election violence (according to the Government of Kenya), how many police officers were prosecuted successfully for these deaths, these acts of terror?  
Answer: Zero.

Here's a story. The last one. A group of friends are having drinks somewhere in Nairobi's CBD. When we leave, I decide that I want to walk for a bit to clear my head. *Haiya sawa*, one of them says, *Tembea, but chungu this street and this street kuna makarao*. You can go, he says, but watch out, on this street and that one, there are cops.

Question: Shouldn't the one that terrifies you, the cause of the terror in the citizens, be considered the terrorist?

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## **Nowhere to Run: How Urban Terrorism Is Impacting Nairobi's Architecture and Public Spaces**

It is nearly impossible to go a single day in Nairobi without going through "security." It is a part of the urban landscape. Surveillance cameras, sniffer dogs, metal detectors, and concrete walls are all meant to deter terrorists and petty criminals; they communicate fortification, even in grocery stores and gyms.

But the visual language of security is full of paradoxes; while the quasi-militarised architecture seeks to reassure the public that we are safe from attack, it simultaneously acknowledges that we are *indeed* under attack, and all the time - only one unpredictable, unfortunate moment away from siege.

Another paradox: we endorse these forms of security through our daily acquiescence, but at the same time acknowledge its superficiality. Each time a bored or underpaid guard waves a metal detector wand around us -ignoring the beeping sound - and glances through our bags, we tell ourselves that this the whole exercise is pointless. Yet few complain or change their behaviour. And

terrorist attacks continue to happen.

On 15 January, in 14 Riverside, which hosts the DusitD2 hotel and various commercial offices, a suicide bomber detonated himself at the Secret Garden Café. Other attackers forced their way through the single entrance using hand grenades and automatic weapons. Many victims were, tragically and fatefully, barricaded inside a “fortress.” While the vast majority of people trapped within the compound were rescued by private and state security forces, by the end of the siege, [21 people](#) had been killed. Al Shabaab claimed responsibility for the attack.

George Musamali, a security analyst and CEO of the security firm Executive Protection Services, argues that the method of terrorist attacks evolves following the path of least resistance and that Kenya’s security apparatus has failed to keep up with the terrorists. Airplane hijackings, for example, were more common until heightened airport security made them more difficult. Then, car bombings like the twin attacks on the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998, became more common. Musamali says that after that restrictions on acquiring and transporting large quantities of explosives made this type of terrorist attack more difficult.

Now, of all the attacks in Kenya that have been claimed by Al Shabaab since 2011, the majority have involved active shooters. In the case of 14 Riverside, the same provisions that would have protected people from a bomb blast may have sealed victims in. Musamali says, “If you look at the modus operandi of Al Shabaab, they force their way in. More measures being recommended are not being implemented, so that’s why you find it so easy for Al Shabaab to use the same method in 2015 as in 2019. They see no change in tactics.”

The 14 Riverside attack has reinvigorated valid concerns about the security of commercial complexes in Nairobi, as key gaps in security at 14 Riverside are replicated in many other malls and compounds throughout the country. Perhaps the question we need to ask is what security really means for the public. Until then, we will continue to be sniffed, scanned, patted - and let through.

### **Guards, gadgets and now guns**

Nairobi has always been a city obsessed with insecurity and, as a result, its residents are accustomed to security and surveillance. Because Nairobi did not truly ever break out of its original colonial, race-segregated lines, it got a head

start on the privatisation of “public” space in the name of “securing” it. Mike Davis, writing about Los Angeles in the 1980s, pointed out that “the universal consequence of the crusade to secure the city is the [destruction of any truly democratic urban space](#).... The ‘public’ spaces of the new megastructures and supermalls have supplanted traditional streets and disciplined their spontaneity.” He could just as well be describing Nairobi.

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A mosaic of fences and walls is designed to provide social insulation for upper class residents from the threat of the public poor. In this way, Nairobians have come to develop a peculiarly comfortable relationship with security apparatuses that would seem severe in other cities. Through perimeter walls, barbed wire, guards, and gates, Nairobi polices its social boundaries. “The [fear of the criminal other](#) has shaped Nairobi’s built form in profound ways,” writes anthropologist Constance Smith, “but has also led to a new architecture of desire and aspiration, influencing architectural aesthetics.” The security apparatus is not only an extension of fear, but also a marker of aspiration.

Because the public is so inured to life behind high walls and barbed wire (or outside of them) - in contrast with other cities where “the right to the street” is taken for granted - in Nairobi the extraordinary ubiquity of security is tolerated. It is more important that security is seen rather than guaranteed. Security consultant Andrew Franklin criticises what he calls the “industry of fear,” which is the market’s response to urban terrorism: “guards, gadgets, and now guns.” If this were not the case, perhaps there would be more investment in tactics that are less visible but equally effective.

For a mall, the bulk of the work in detecting and preventing a terror attack is painfully mundane. It is unglamorous, says Franklin, like examining food delivery boda bodas that move in and out of compounds, often unchecked. Or scanning deliveries that come in before dawn and get loaded in the morning. Franklin suggests that at least some of the ammunition used at the 14 Riverside attack was

already within the compound - an insight echoed by other analysts with whom I spoke - indicating large gaps in security that have nothing to do with what people see when they enter and exit every day.

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Another important but undervalued tool is counter-surveillance. Musamali recommends that malls, in addition to hiring trained observers to monitor suspicious activity, should also equip tenants with specialised observation skills. In London, for example, the city combatted terrorist attacks by the Irish Republican Army in part by training ordinary people to spot and flag behaviours that mark intention to plan a terror attack.

### **Locked city**

Sometimes, in addition to being inconvenient, the architecture of security may actually compromise security. With its single entry point, the design of the 14 Riverside complex may have jeopardised the lives of those inside. One independent security analyst I spoke to (who chose to remain anonymous) said that there were originally meant to be twelve attackers at 14 Riverside. "Logistics made it difficult for the other to pursue. One group was supposed to actively engage in killing of hostages and the other six were supposed to engage the responders," he said. "The other team did not arrive on time. [14 Riverside] only has one entrance. It could have been devastating."

"We're living in a concrete city where everyone has locked themselves in," says Musamali. "If someone manages to break your access control, compromise it, and get in, then you definitely have given them easy targets because people do not have escape routes."

The former analyst added that he knew the independent security company that previously completed a security assessment at 14 Riverside. Because the compound was originally intended to be only an office space, he said, there were additional recommendations the security company made to accommodate the presence of a hotel. Those suggestions were not heeded.

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Indeed, there is no legal obligation for building managements to achieve a certain standard of security, and those that do exist are seldom enforced. For example, the [Occupational Safety and Health Act](#) (2007) requires that all employers ensure that their employees are familiar with fire escape routes. Nevertheless, fire drills are few and far between. In the case of 14 Riverside, not all who were trapped within the building knew of or were able to access the small pedestrian walkway in the rear.

Furthermore, and equally disturbing, there are scant standards or guidelines for private security companies in Nairobi. Byron Adera, a pioneer Kenya Special Forces officer and security consultant, says that mediocrity runs throughout the sector: “You see different uniforms, different malls, but it’s the same kind of searching that is done. They’ve got a wand in their hands, and they sweep you without asking questions if it beeps.”

To fill the void in industry standards, Adera and other former military personnel have formed the Association of Corporate and Industrial Security Management Professionals, an organisation that liaises with the government, security providers, building managements, and other stakeholders to develop and enforce standards for security providers.

But, even if there are standards of quality for security provision, there is no obligation for mall managements to invest in it—and, perhaps worryingly, little financial incentive to do so. Previously, the (anonymous) analyst had been approached by the management of a well-known mall in Westlands to run a security audit, but, after quoting the cost of his services, the management decided not to move forward, citing cost. “The management of these properties only look at the bottom line,” he said. “They don’t look at other factors.”

In other countries, it is understood that the intention of terrorists is to make crowded spaces “empty” - to terrorise the public into retreating inwards in fear. But in Nairobi, where inclusive, truly public spaces have long been “designed” out, where the attack happened in one of the most insulated, formidable-looking,

closed-off, “safest” places, the horror of urban terror attacks runs deeper.

On 4 February 2019, the U.S. Embassy issued a warning to its citizens to avoid areas frequented by tourists and foreigners, as there was risk of another terror attack. The risk will not wane. For the first time, for the city’s walled-off elites, there are no “safe zones” left. Not only are the trappings of security to which we comply daily ineffective but they are perhaps the very thing which makes us targets.

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## **Search and (Maybe) Protect: Stop and Frisk, Nairobi-Style**

The other day, a friend of mine told me about something he witnessed in a matatu. Two post-secondary school students boarded the matatu and sat down. As they waited for it to fill up, all the other passengers uneasily stood up and walked out one by one. The reason? The other passengers felt “under threat by possible terrorists.”

The same students had moved into a hostel that week and some residents of the area had called the local OCPD to alert him of the presence of some *strange and suspicious people*. The OCPD deployed a police unit near the hostel immediately. Traumatized, the students eventually opted to move to a neighbourhood that had more residents of a similar ethnic origin to theirs. They would feel more comfortable there. What was their crime? They were of Cushitic origin and people from other communities had branded them as “suspect terrorists”.

Kenya has experienced several terror incidents over the last five years. There have been major attacks at Westgate Shopping Mall, Mpeketoni Town, Garissa University College and Dusit Hotel, which have left numerous fatalities and many others injured. Other attacks have also occurred at a Nairobi’s police station, in Mandera Town, and parts of Lamu County. The attacks have heightened the sense of insecurity in urban areas, the coast and the north-eastern part of Kenya. In addition, the country is also grappling with internal security concerns. We

occasionally read or hear in the news of armed robberies, roadside muggings and spiked drinks in pubs leading to robberies.

Many have put the blame on the porous borders with neighbouring countries. It is understood that these enable the easy movement of arms into the country. Added to this is the high level of corruption within the immigration system and some security organs. Youth unemployment and hopelessness have also enabled easy radicalisation.

As a resident of Nairobi for over 36 years, I have witnessed a gradual shift from a very open society to one that now habitually interacts with suspicion and a deep sense of insecurity. In the 1980s and 90s it was the norm in many residential areas to have cypress or bougainvillea fences. School gates remained open throughout the day and shopping areas had entrances wide open. Serious robberies were the preserve of famous armed bank robbers though occasional muggings were reported. The newspapers even had a "Lost and Found" column.

Things began to change in the 1990s, perhaps due to the impact of the austerity measures of the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). Growing cases of burglaries forced us to start installing burglar proofing to fortify our doors and windows. Many of us went ahead to replace natural fences with walls. Around the same time the country experienced political riots, often accompanied by looting. These forced shop owners to start completely sealing off their displays during non-working hours. Window shopping in the Central Business District became a thing of the past. The streets increasingly came to host large numbers of street children who would threaten to smear you with human excrement if you didn't give them a few coins.

At the start of the new century, the government made an effort to improve the situation by re-installing street lighting. One of the individuals in the private sector who was instrumental in this initiative was the current women's legislative representative for Nairobi, Esther Passaris. Through her company's "Adopt a Light" campaign, Ms Passaris promoted the commercial value of street lights through advertising. Informal areas, parks and public spaces also received the benefit of high mast lighting. The city felt safer.

But the past few years have witnessed a change in major security threats. Although petty theft and armed robberies remain a concern, the threat of global

terror has taken the limelight. Kenya had experienced prior terror attacks, notably, the August 7th 1998 US embassy attack and the Norfolk Hotel attack in 1980. As serious as they were, however, such attacks were infrequent and not viewed as a common trend. Terror attacks have been on the rise since 2008, and particularly since 2011 when the Kenyan military crossed over into Somalia to fight Al Shabaab militants.

The effect of this new trend in urban areas is visible in shopping malls, churches, buildings and public transport. Twenty years ago it was unheard of that one would be stopped and searched as one entered buildings; today it is the norm. Entry and exit points are highly controlled in these buildings. One is at times left to wonder how occupants would escape in case of a genuine emergency. Government buildings have also sealed off pedestrian pavements in the city centre under the pretext of "security". Standing and waiting somewhere or appearing to be idle has become a crime.

The security infrastructure is formidable. CCTV cameras are now common in many buildings, as are properties guarded by electric fences. Guards sitting in control rooms, with access to alarm response units and several barriers for vehicle access to parking lots and basements have become a feature of most buildings in the city.

Unfortunately, many security features/responses are on a high alert only immediately after a terror threat or attack. After a few weeks, laxity sets in. I have worked in buildings where nobody is in the security room over lunch hour. Security guards are also less rigorous with individuals they are used to seeing, and turn the searches into mere formalities. I find it humorous that the guards at some buildings never search my pockets when I have a bag. On the other hand, they are very quick to find out what is in the bag. They mostly find either a rugby kit or a book and packed lunch.

For bloggers and photo enthusiasts, photography is generally not permitted in most public places. While carrying out some transport and urban planning research recently with some colleagues from the United Kingdom, we were stopped by security officers and had to explain why we were taking pictures. To the visitors it appeared strange that one can be questioned for photography of infrastructure. But in any case, I was recently able to reconstruct the entire site in 3D using images from Google Maps!

Two years ago, one of Kenya's top photographers and bloggers who runs the blog [nairobinoir.com](http://nairobinoir.com) was [arrested on suspicion](#) of terrorism while taking photographs near a shopping mall. He was eventually released after a campaign by activists and bloggers who used social media and other channels, but the ordeal left him traumatised and had a negative effect on his business. It is regrettable that it has become the norm for many citizens to be treated as suspects on flimsy grounds.

I also remember a few years ago when a parent of Asian origin at a local school dropped his son off and decided to take pictures of some birds. Another parent who was dropping off her child saw him. Alarmed, she took a photograph of him and shared it on social media, warning people of a "possible imposter". The image trended for the better part of the day. When it got to the man's attention, he had to take to social media and explain who he was and what he was doing.

As a person of mixed racial heritage, I have become accustomed to being forced to identify myself to the police in various parts of the city. The reason they give is normally that "*you don't look like a Kenyan*" (as if there is a textbook definition of how a Kenyan should look). It happens so frequently that these days I even make a joke of it when I am stopped. When this happened recently in December 2018, I joked to the young policeman that I could predict the order of the questions he would ask. He looked at me in surprise.

Not too long ago I asked a group of biracial friends to share their experiences with the security organs. There were several amusing responses. It was clear that all had experienced some "confrontation" with the police. A common theme was that they were used to it and did not hold any hard feelings. This included taking the cops in circles by answering questions in their African mother tongues! One who happens to be a linguist once chose to respond to a policeman in deep Dholuo. He left the officer baffled, as he could not follow half of the conversation. Many say they simply opt to identify themselves and move on with their lives.

The two students' experience in the matatu, however, is one of those occasions where citizens are treated as suspects because of mere assumptions related to their external appearance and ethnic origin. Such people are searched more thoroughly at buildings like shopping malls and are treated with suspicion when walking in groups. The arbitrary arrests and detention of several people of Somali origin in 2014 left many of them scarred. It is believed to have widened the divide between Cushites and people from other language groups in the country. As

detailed by Owaahh in [From 'Shifta' War to Al Shabaab: Why Kenya is her own worst enemy](#), it is clear that there has always been some sense of friction between the inhabitants of Northern Kenya and the rest of the country since independence.

But we are all caught up in this security dragnet one way or another - some more than others - and I wonder what it does to our sense of who belongs here, what a city is for, and how one can feel at home in a place like this.

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## **Trapped: My Twelve-Hour Ordeal in DusitD2**

On Tuesday, January 15, my editor sent me on what I thought would be a routine, if unnecessary, assignment. I was to do an interview with George Ooko, the chief executive officer of the Commission for Revenue Allocation (CRA), which was to run in NTV's 9pm bulletin. As the reporter, I thought my story on county revenue was strong enough with the video clips we already had, and that it could run without it. But I was overruled, and along with my cameraman Dickson Onyango, I grudgingly set off for the DusitD2 complex on 14 Riverside Drive where CRA's offices are located.

The afternoon was sunny, hotter than usual, and dry. Our interview had been scheduled for 2:30 pm, but because of logistical challenges, we arrived at the venue some minutes past 2:40 pm. I was already anxious and irritable.

We were ushered into the boardroom of CRA's offices, located somewhere on the third floor of Grosvenor building, which is adjacent to the Dusit hotel.

Our interviewee Ooko arrived, and Dickson and I spent a few minutes setting up before settling down for the interview. But just before I asked my first question, we heard a loud explosion that must have lasted a few seconds and shook the entire building.

At first, we thought that the explosion was from a different building, perhaps from another office compound. But then, it was followed by gunshots. I remained unmoved in my seat, because I had not wrapped my mind around the fact that our building was under attack.

Ooko suggested that we hold the interview until we figured out what was happening. But just then, we heard a second explosion, again closely followed by gunshots. It is at this point that the CEO dashed to his office, leaving Dickson and I in the conference room.

From the windows, we could see people on the ground floor running for safety using the back exits with the help of the security guards. By this time, staff members who were on our floor started running up and down the corridors. We got up and followed them, not really knowing where we were going.

I was running for the stairs holding the camera bag, which had other equipment inside; it weighed about 10kg. Dickson was holding the tripod and the camera.

On reaching the stairs, we found a crowd of people scampering for safety. Nobody at this point had figured out what was going on; the flight down the staircase was confused and disorganised. In my hands, I was still gripping the bag.

Dickson, thinking like a journalist, asked me to carry the tripod with the camera bag. He wanted to capture some video. But just before he could frame his shot, one of the assailants shot at us, forcing everyone to scamper for safety. The sound of the gun was so loud that we thought he had shot at us from inside the building, perhaps from the ground floor through the staircase.

And because of the terror, I remember freezing on my way up for a few seconds before I regained my senses. Dickson was running for the lifts, which I thought was not a good idea, but driven by panic I followed him. But the lifts did not open.

I ran into the nearest open door, which turned out to be the door that led to the washrooms on the first floor. Inside, I found some people, whose number I could not figure out at that moment. It is in this washroom that I remember mumbling some prayers to God for safety.

But once we entered one of the cubicles, our fears grew. Someone whose identity we could not figure out was trying to gain access to the washroom from the

ceiling, which was cracking under his heavy weight. I didn't have time to think of how bizarre this was, or how on earth that person got there. We were just looking for somewhere to hide.

We ended up in an open space just outside the washroom, which was a room under renovation. Again, a shot was fired towards the window, I guess after one of the attackers saw us from outside. We ran back to the washroom without thinking twice, just that this time around we ran into the first cubicle, the second one's ceiling having proven unsafe. It later turned out that the "intruder" was one of the staff members of the CRA, who was stuck on the second floor. By this time I had abandoned the camera bag and the tripod in the empty room.



WATCH: As it Happened: Attack on  
14 Riverside, Nairobi

We were seven people in the first cubicle, its small size notwithstanding. The second one now had other people. Our first thought was to lock the main door of the washroom from the inside before we locked the door of the small cubicle. I do not remember the person who offered to lock the main door leading to the washroom. All I can remember is that the last man who entered the cubicle, a tall clean-shaven man, was the one who locked the door of the cubicle.

I remember one of the people I was hiding with in the cubicle was breathing heavily, loud gasping breaths which scared most of us. In our thinking, any slight sound would alert the attackers to where we were. Our attempts to ask the good old man, who I later learnt was Prof. Edward Akong'o Oyugi, to manage his breathing, fell on deaf ears, adding to our turmoil.

I was sitting on the toilet seat, which I believed was the safest position and was away from the door, just in case one of the attackers gained access and tried shooting through the door of the cubicle.

But my comfort did not last. Since Prof. Oyugi, who by this time was leaning on the door of the cubicle, could not control his breathing, someone asked me to give up my seat for him. It meant that I would take up his position, which I thought was riskier since I would be standing directly opposite the door. But I got up, and gave the old man the seat.

The other people had taken up all the safe spots away from the door. I decided to squeeze myself to the side of the toilet seat. The other two men squeezed themselves on the opposite side, while another two stood on the opposite direction, but away from the door.

The heat inside out cubicle was beginning to get thicker and hotter. My standing position was also getting uncomfortable. Because of the squeezed space between the toilet seat and the wall, I had to stand on one leg, and switch to the other often.

Any slight noise sent us all into a panic. I remember at one point someone in the opposite cubicle had tried flushing the toilet, I do not know for what reason, throwing the whole washroom into further panic mode.

By this time, the shooting was rampant, punctuated by tense silence.

I remember one man who had taken refuge in the wash area where the sinks were mumbling a prayer. In the adjacent cubicle, I could hear some people whispering what I believed were their last prayers. One was on the phone, telling the person on the other end that we were under attack.

The time now was heading towards 4pm. At this point, I decided to alert my colleagues in the newsroom on what was happening.

I checked my phone and news was already spreading that DusitD2 complex was under attack. I was scared for my life. I remember making a prayer to God asking him not to send me to hell if I died.

The ensuing hours would be some of my longest. We would swap sitting positions, but carefully so as not to make noise. My legs grew sore at some point, but the thought of getting killed in case I went outside the washroom kept me stuck in my position.

Lucky for us, the washrooms were air-conditioned, which helped cool the damp

air that was increasingly filling up the space. My fear, however, was the gap underneath the cubicle door, which easily exposed our legs. We all tried as much as we could to push ourselves as far from the door as possible.

As time went by, the air in the washroom become thicker and heavier. I took off my tie and waistcoat, and so did the others. Seconds turned to minutes, and minutes into hours. We didn't speak much to each other. How could we? What can you tell six other strangers in that moment?

To keep myself distracted, I stayed in communication by text message with friends and colleagues, who were encouraging me to keep strong.

There were occasional gunshots, which made us jump every single time. At some point, we heard someone try to gain access of the main door that led to the washrooms where we were in. We could not tell who it was, because they never gained entry.

We kept silent, and the good old professor tried to control his breathing, even though he occasionally went back to his "default setting".

I remember telling the people I was hiding with that help had come after my colleagues in the newsroom informed me that the police had arrived at the scene. This was sometime after 4pm. Little did I know that I would spend the next 12 hours holed up in the same place.

I had by then not informed my parents about the situation since I knew they would get too anxious and panicky. But I kept contact with my colleagues. My bosses had also reached out to me, asking me not to lose hope as they were trying all they could to get me help. I remember speaking to Dickson just a few minutes after we separated, telling him that I was hiding inside one of the washrooms on the first floor. I later learnt that he was hiding on the same floor, but in a different room.

I remember one dear friend from work asking me to keep communicating with her through text messages. I know she was trying to keep me calm. This, however, did not last long, as my phone battery died. I do not remember what time it was, but before my phone went off, I gave her a number of one of the people I was with so that she could reach me.



# Geopolitics, Greed, Ineptitude and the Losing Battle Against Terror

We live in a world where the most crucial aspects of our lives have become profoundly interconnected and indeed interdependent. And this reality, needless to say, makes international cooperation for security a strategic imperative.

Unfortunately, when it comes to security, and more specifically terrorism and counterterrorism, the marketability of one's expertise mainly depends on one's willingness to unquestionably embrace the official narrative. In the West and across the Middle East and Africa, the media and pundits have become relentless echo chambers of this master narrative.

How has that master narrative made our world safer in the past two decades? Do we not have more terrorists today than when the global war on terrorism was launched and have not despots and corrupt rulers around the world joined the cause? Is it not time to pose the question: Why is insecurity dealt with as though it exists in vacuum?

Considering the prominence of what I call the dis-strategic approach to fight Al Shabaab, I believe that things are likely to get worse before they start getting better.

## **FGS: An imaginary government**

Almost every aspect of security in Somalia is outsourced to foreign actors with deeply entrenched competing interests. Though their scopes vary, none of these actors are accountable to the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), which has fostered a condition that entirely lacks strategic cohesion and centralised command and control.

A case in point: The Kenyan Defence Force (KDF) has a free hand in Jubbaland and the Kenyan government has more clout in that federal state than the FGS. (Capturing the port of Kismaayo in Jubbaland from Al Shabaab was a stated goal of KDF when it invaded Somalia in October 2011.)

Similarly, Ethiopia has a free hand in Baay and Bakool regions of the South West

federal state. While both Kenya and Ethiopia are part of the African Union Mission in Somalia (Amisom), they have been operating strategically independent of the mission that was endorsed by the United Nations Security Council and funded by the international community. The troops on the ground from Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda mainly take their orders from their respective governments in Nairobi, Addis Ababa or Kampala.

Like its predecessors, the current FGS has not been able to subdue Al Shabaab, significantly improve security or to implement a robust strategy to claim a monopoly on violence. Around mid-2017, FGS staged a targeted disarmament campaign in Mogadishu that proved to be subjective and problematic as it was interpreted as a sub-clan defanging operation. This ill-advised campaign ignited inter-clan tensions that continue to get worse.

When the dust settled, the FGS reactivated a controversial foreign-driven cooption strategy initiated by the previous government to lure top Al Shabaab militants to defect and join the government. This strategy led to some key government appointments, such as that of [Zakariya Ahmed Hersi](#) - believed to be the man who orchestrated the deadly Garissa University College attack in Kenya - who is now one of the top officials at Somalia's National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA).

In August 2017, Mukhtar Robow (aka Abu Mansour), who was the former spokesman and a deputy leader of Al Shabaab, defected. For more than a year, Robow was treated like a celebrity who had only played the role of a terrorist on TV. Robow then embarked on a government-funded rebranding campaign. During that period, he met with a number of traditional clan elders, international diplomats, including the British Ambassador, and various government officials and Members of Parliament.

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Initially, the FGS and the international community presented Robow as a model of

de-radicalisation; both were eager to allow him to participate in the South West federal state election. When it looked like Robow was winning the election, something suddenly compelled the FGS to pull the rug under him - a process that caused deaths in Baidoa, the arrest of Robow, and the expulsion of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General which subsequently led to domestic and international [consequences](#).

The irony is that up till now, Al Shabaab has been successfully outperforming the FGS in almost all fronts: in terms of governance and a monopoly on violence in areas which it controls, collecting “taxes” or extortion money without preferring one group or economic class over another, providing humanitarian services, such as distribution of goats and sheep during Eid, and “administering justice”. So effective are Al Shabaab’s courts that people who are in business disputes or those whose houses have been occupied by a member of a strong clan often seek rulings in their courts. Unlike the FGS courts, where such rulings could change so many times due to bribes and counter- bribes, Al Shabaab’s rulings are final. Or, as is widely known, there will be some serious consequences.

Add the controversial arrest of Robow and FGS’ reputation of silencing its opponents by taking draconian measures against them and the government comes across as less democratic than the terrorists they helped rebrand. This could have negative implications on the state-building project in Somalia.

Despite the façade of competence that it projects to those that readily fund its “war against Al Shabaab”, the FGS has been crippled by various projects that auction out Somalia’s natural sources to the highest shady bidder. This is why the FGS has not gained an inch of new territory from Al Shabaab in the past two years.

### **Kenya’s supposed war on terror**

Kenya is only second to Somalia when it comes to being the stage of some very spectacular terror acts by Al Shabaab. These include the Westgate mall attack in September 2013 where 67 people were killed, the Garissa University College attack in April 2015 that claimed the lives of 147 students, and the latest attack in January 2019 targeting the Dusit building complex in Nairobi where more than 20 people died.

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*“war against Al Shabaab”, the FGS has been crippled by various projects that auction out Somalia’s natural sources to the highest shady bidder. This is why the FGS has not gained an inch of new territory from Al Shabaab in the past two years.*

Due to the political fault lines, or the dynamics of colonial legacy, the politics of domination, the ever-mutating geopolitical interests that are often masqueraded as a war against terrorism, Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia (and rest of the Horn) are likely to remain volatile. And, as if this is not perilous enough, both Kenya and Ethiopia are bent on advancing their own [political, economic, and security interests in Somalia](#) while keeping diplomatic doors open and counting on successive incompetent and corrupt Somali governments that fail to recognise the importance of reconciling within itself and its own people before demanding substantive respect to its sovereignty.

Meanwhile - and perhaps in a way that is less covert than Ethiopia’s cooperation with Al Shabaab (elaboration below) - KDF has been executing Kenya’s plan to unilaterally establish a buffer zone in an area that technically annexes Somali territory. KDF has been providing support to Jubbaland’s leaders who implicitly endorse the wall that Kenya says it is building along the Kenya-Somalia border. Kenya has also controversially laid claim to a section of Somalia’s maritime border, a triangle rich in oil; this case is currently before the [International Court of Justice](#). And in recent months, Jubbaland’s leadership has technically severed its relationship with the FGS.

Moreover, it has been alleged that KDF operates an illegal enterprise with Al Shabaab and corrupt Somali officials. As recent reports have revealed, [KDF is “in business”](#) with the terrorist organisation. It helps them in “tax collection” at checkpoints and in smuggling contraband. A 2015 report titled [“Black and White: Kenya’s Criminal Racket in Somalia”](#), stated that KDF was involved in a \$400-million sugar and charcoal smuggling scheme that funded Al Shabaab militants in Somalia. The report further claimed that profits from this illicit trade were being split between the Jubbaland administration of Ahmed Madobe (whose militia fought alongside KDF as they marched towards Kismaayo), KDF officials and Al Shabaab.

*Moreover, it has been alleged that KDF operates an illegal enterprise with Al*

*Shabaab and corrupt Somali officials. As recent reports have revealed, KDF is “in business” with the terrorist organisation.*

These realities have corroded Kenya’s goodwill capital.

### **Ethiopia’s counterproductive intelligence**

Unlike Kenya, much of Ethiopia’s insecurity is the side effect of authoritarian rule of the previous regime and the brutality of its security forces. It is worth noting that it was US-backed Ethiopian forces that pushed the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) out of Mogadishu in 2006; later on Al Shabaab forced the Ethiopian forces out of Somalia and took control of large swathes of central and southern Somalia, including the capital. This begs the question: How did Ethiopia manage to escape Al Shabaab’s wrath despite being the country that destroyed the UIC and that carried out [the most brutal occupation](#) in Somalia’s history between 2007 and 2009?

The answer partially lies in the fact that there is not a single clan-based faction or armed religious sect in Somalia that the previous Ethiopian regime did not arm, fund and supply subjective intelligence data to in order to eradicate their rival groups. This divide-and-rule strategy has proved to be counterproductive and has led to the growth of armed groups that were previously unarmed.

Back in 2007, shortly after the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia, the RAND Corporation published a book titled [Building Moderate Muslim Networks](#). The book offered what many policymakers in the West considered a viable strategy in countering extremism and curtailing terrorism: to arm, empower, and boost the image of “Sufi Muslims” who were willing to fight against the “Salafi jihadis” who were coming to destroy the graves and tombs of their holy men. Ethiopia became the testing ground; hence the growth of Ahlu Sunna WalJama’a (ASWJ), a paramilitary religious group of various shades that operates in some parts of Somalia.

But ASWJ could not be trusted to become a powerful faction with one common objective and command structure. After all, legendary freedom fighters, such as Sayyid Mohamed Abdulla Hassan of Somalia, Omar Mukhtar of Libya and the Mahdi Muhammad Ahmed of Sudan were all Sufis. Therefore, ASWJ had to be supported along sub-clan basis in order to ensure perpetual fragmentation and to

sow seeds of mistrust. This was not too difficult for Ethiopia; it was already using a similar strategy against warlords, Al Shabaab, and the Ras Kamboni militia, a defunct extremist group.

### **The transnational threat pretext**

For terrorism to be curtailed, the local and the international press must scrutinise the official narrative in order to get to the bottom of the dynamics at play; it is the only way to filter out real terrorism from geopolitical gambits.

You may recall that back in 2002, a group calling itself the [Army of Palestine](#) fired anti-aircraft missiles at an Israeli airplane in Kenya, using two shoulder-launched missiles, only to miss and abandon their valuable arsenal for the Kenyan police to discover before the same group re-emerged in a suicide car bomb attack on a hotel ( Paradise Beach resort, Kikambala) populated by Israeli nationals, [claiming the lives of nine Kenyans and three Israeli tourists](#). The Army of Palestine has since ridden off into the horizon, never to be heard from again.

*For terrorism to be curtailed, the local and the international press must scrutinise the official narrative in order to get to the bottom of the dynamics at play; it is the only way to filter out real terrorism from geopolitical gambits.*

Seventeen years later, we have Al Shabaab using radicalised Kenyans, [claiming responsibility for the DusitD2 Hotel](#) terror attack and stating it “was retaliation for US President Donald Trump’s decision to declare Jerusalem the capital city of Israel”.

Of course the statement does not answer the critical questions that come to mind: What took them this long? Why this particular target? What does Kenya have to do with a decision made by the U.S. and Israel? But it does establish a sound pretext for Israel—which has been actively expanding its influence in Africa—to establish a military presence in the Horn in order to stop Al Shabaab’s transnational threats in their tracks.

### **Commonsensical counterterrorism**

Globally, as well as regionally, when it comes to understanding the causes and effects of terrorism, most have surrendered their commonsense and capacity to think critically to their respective authorities, who often subjectively frame their

perceptions. Frightened minds naturally lend their full trust to and seek protection from the authorities, even when these authorities have nothing more than a false sense of security to offer.

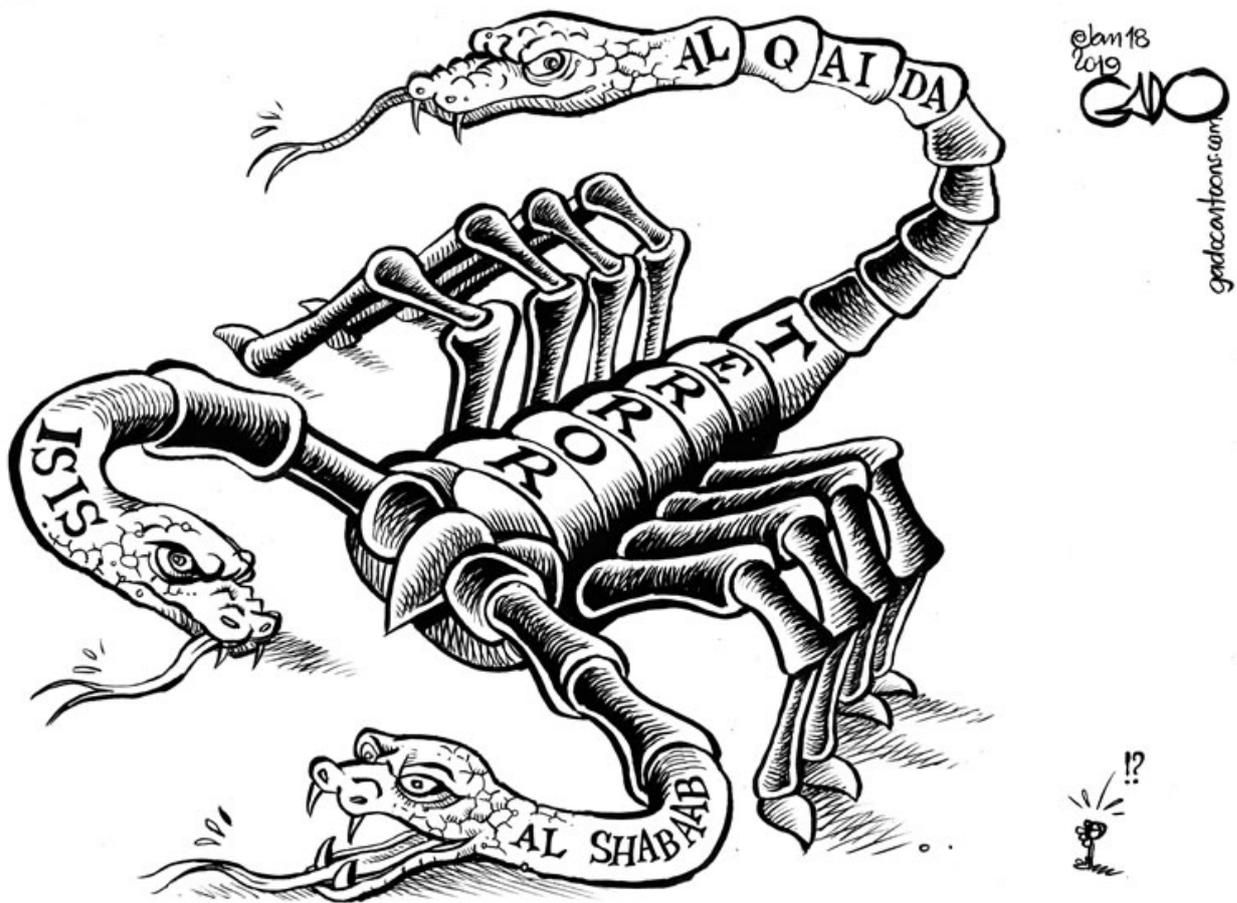
Cooperation must be based on good faith and willingness to explore data beyond the fear of discovering other issues that may challenge our preconceived realities. When collaborating nations submissively get locked into a single story or an officially packaged master narrative that terrorists are only driven by religious extremism and that they are better dealt with when dead, one must take a quick scan through the rear view mirror of history.

Sustainable security will remain a pie in the sky as long the international community continues its Amisom-focused stabilisation initiative at the expense of rebuilding robust Somali military and security forces that are capable of keeping extremists at bay and securing Somalia's borders.

And Somalia and its neighbours will not vanquish terror while Kenya, Ethiopia and their allies remain knee-deep in Somalia's internal political affairs and continue to exert influence on various Somali "leaders" by fuelling factional or clan-based politics.

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## **The Axis of Terror!**



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

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?