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## Incident Preliminary Analysis

### Terrorist Attack, Mogadishu, Somalia

20 February 2015

#### I. THE INCIDENT

On 20 February 2015, twin bomb blasts hit the Central Hotel at noon in Mogadishu, Somalia leaving 25 people dead and 40 injured. Among those killed were *Mohamed Aden Guled*, Deputy Mayor of Mogadishu, and Omar Ali Nor, a Somali legislator. Among the injured were *Ali Ahmed Jala Janagli*, Somali Aviation and Transport Minister, and Deputy Prime Minister, *Mohamed Arte*.

The first bomb blast originated from an explosive-laden car parked near the mosque inside the premises of the Central Hotel and was set off by an *Al Shabaab* terrorist named, *Ismail Muse*.

The second explosion occurred when a female suicide bomber, identified as *Lula Ahmed Dahir*, walked into the hotel's prayer room, and detonated her suicide vest. Both *Al Shabaab* terrorists were Dutch-Somalis. *Dahir* worked part-time at the Central Hotel for four months prior to the attack, according to Somali Intelligence Services investigations.



Scene of the twin suicide bombing by *Al Shabaab* at Central Hotel in Mogadishu.



Remnants of the suicide car bomb that exploded inside the Central Hotel complex in Mogadishu, next to the mosque

The hotel, popular with ministers and Somali government officials, had not been attacked by *Al Shabaab* before.

Shortly after the attack, *Al Shabaab* spokesman, *Abdulaziz Abu Musab* said in a statement that *Al Shabaab* was responsible for the attack and similar attacks would follow.

The last lethal attack of this magnitude on Somali government officials took place in December 2009, when *Al Shabaab* terrorists attacked the *Shame Hotel* in Mogadishu, going from room to room, killing 25 guests, including three Somali government officials.

## II. ANALYSIS

This is yet another successful attack by *Al Shabaab* on a venue frequented by Somali dignitaries, senior military and police officers and government Ministers.

The fact that the car bomber and the female suicide bomber were able to enter, high security premises such as the hotel complex and prayer room unchallenged and strike such high profile targets, highlights *Al Shabaab's* enhanced skills in operational intelligence gathering and its infiltration capability.

It also exposes the extreme weakness and gross failure of the security apparatus at such a sensitive site like the Mogadishu Central Hotel. The fact that the female suicide bomber was a temporary employee at the hotel for four months prior to the attack indicates that at such a venue where government ministers and high-level officials frequently meet, employees and other visitors were not subjected to proper checking and screening.

Furthermore, this incident also provides us with an idea of how resilient, patient and meticulous *Al Shabaab* can be when preparing for an asymmetrical terrorist attack. As in the Westgate Mall attack, *Al Shabaab* did not show haste in carrying out the ultimate action. The group took the time it required to do proper reconnaissance of the target. It had the patience to wait until its agent, a radicalized Dutch Somali female, was able to infiltrate the hotel, win the trust of the management and colleagues, be accepted as one of theirs, allay fears of being detected and struck only when the timing and the environment were appropriate.

It should be recalled that *Al Shabaab* had, on several occasions since 2009, successfully managed to breach security at high security venues such as the Presidential Palace, the airport, UN complex, Somali Intelligence Headquarters, *Al Jazeera* Hotel and others.

### III. CONCLUSIONS

The attack once more demonstrates that, despite being degraded and diminished by the loss of control of key cities and other important locations in Somalia, and the demise of a good number of its top leaders due to drone strikes, Al Shabaab remains a formidable threat in Eastern Africa. It has shown resilience and has adapted to the new realities on the ground. It still retains considerable initiative and remains an armed force to be reckoned with.

Its strength no longer lies in the conventional warfare. Al Shabaab's continued efficiency is in its capacity to deploy small, mobile and effective teams of well trained, radicalized and highly motivated combatants, the Amniyat cells, and unleash an asymmetrical war of attrition against Amisom, Somali government troops and other valuable targets in East Africa and beyond. The use of suicide bombers, grenade attacks and Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) in a variety of forms, targeted assassinations of high profile public figures and politicians, peace activists, international aid workers, journalists, civil society figures, police officers and the military, have become Al Shabaab's most preferred "modus operandi" and principal form of action. Such activities should, therefore, be expected to continue in the foreseeable future. Public gatherings, shopping malls, public squares, public transport and other facilities and locations that can lead to massive loss of life, damage to property and attract maximum visibility and publicity, have become and will, in the years ahead remain Al Shabaab's most preferred targets.

An effective response to the threat posed by AL Shabaab can only be a multipronged one; one that combines military operations and law enforcement with actions that are aimed at countering violent extremism reasoning, through the production and dissemination by competent, respected and fearless religious, scholars, columnists and community leaders, of narratives that create a hostile environment for terrorists and violent extremists as well as delegitimize and destroy the ideology that motivates, connects and sustains individuals and terrorist groups. .

Trust and deference should not be allowed to play any role when working in volatile and security-sensitive environments. Making appropriate and adequate investment in security capacity building and equipment to ensure continued preparedness and protection against terrorist attacks and decrease the vulnerability of potential targets, especially critical infrastructure and sensitive sites, is mandatory.

Access control to hotel complexes, the airport in Mogadishu, and other critical infrastructure in the country, needs to be improved drastically in order to deter presumed terrorists and thwart their attempt to access these key points, either by vehicle or on foot. As it is already happening in many countries in the region, the route to a sensitive site should be blocked by blast walls and/or vehicle barriers. Checkpoints, where vehicles and/individuals are checked, screened and searched, are crucial security measures that warrant serious consideration.

Developing a strong partnership between the government, local communities, religious leaders, civil society, the private sector and the media, to prevent African men and women from becoming terrorists by providing opportunities and support to those on the path to, or already involved in the commission of violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism to enable them disengage, is a crucial response to the Al Shabaab asymmetrical warfare. This partnership has the potential to deny terrorist groups the soldiers they need to commit acts of terrorism, and destroy the ideology which provides terrorists with a framework for action, and motivation and justification of their acts. The partnership should also enable law enforcement agencies to obtain real time quality operational intelligence that will allow them to timely detect, identify and pursue terrorist suspects in order to apprehend them and bring them to justice.