

Al Shabaab's Jihad – The Secret History Behind the Westgate Mall Attack

by **Geoffrey Clarfield** (January 2014)

Less than four months ago on September 21, 2013, a group of Islamic terrorists from the Somali based militia, Al Shabaab (the “youth,” in Arabic) attacked the Westgate Mall, an upscale shopping center in Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya. As a former resident of that city, I knew it well. I used to drive by its Nakumatt supermarket almost every day on my way to work at the National Museums of Kenya.

The siege lasted more than three days. The attackers killed more than sixty people. Scores more were injured and many hostages were tortured. I know one woman who hid during the siege for six hours and who luckily escaped, undetected by the attackers. There are reports that the perpetrators did their best to separate Muslim from non-Muslim hostages and allowed those who could prove their Islamic credentials to leave the mall. This attack was and is considered part of their Jihad against the Kenyan government and its Western allies. As the woman that I know happens to be Jewish, I can only imagine what would have been her fate had she not escaped. After the attack Al Shabaab announced on the Internet that their Jihad is also directed, against Israel, Zionists and Jews, something the mainstream press has conveniently ignored.

The attack is part of a wider clash of civilizations in East Africa that has been ongoing for more than two hundred years, or perhaps from the beginning of the growth of Islamic communities on the African Indian Ocean Coast and the immediate interior, during the 8th century. The Muslim ethnic groups that have established themselves on the East African coast have been pushing inland for centuries. They do so as either traders and colonists, or militant jihadists. Sometimes, they have taken on all or one of these roles and the Somalis, have been and continue to be major players in this expansion. One of the goals of Somali jihadists has been to either destroy or weaken the Christian nature of highland Ethiopia and whether as Christians, Muslims, Marxists or Nationalists, the Somalis and Ethiopians have fought many wars from medieval times to the most recent Ethiopian army incursions on their common border during the last 24 months.

Kenya is the home of Bantu and Nilotic tribes (and many formerly non-Muslim Oromo-Ethiopian nomads who straddle the northeast part of Kenya that is adjacent to southern Somalia), and who historically were the objects and victims of the coastal Muslim slave trade whose major epicenter was the Islamic state of Zanzibar (and which reached deep into the Congo) that was established by Omani Arab princes in the 19th century. The Somali slave trade was part of this wider network. During the second part of the 19th century the British actively took on the slave trade of East Africa and eventually closed it down by diplomacy and force. The Somali part of this slave trade was finally destroyed and outlawed when the British defeated a Somali Jihadist by the name of Muhammad Abdullah Hassan who mobilized the Somali clans to resist the British until they were finally defeated in the 1920s, and the modern 20th century Somali protectorates were established.

Muslim Somalis all trace their descent back to one man named Somal who is their national and tribal founder somewhere back in the sands of time (The Somalis are Cushitic speaking Muslims whereas neighboring Ethiopians are largely Cushitic speaking Christians). They are subdivided into up to 500 clans and sub-clans who have feuded and continue to feud with each other for the last thousand years despite, all of them having converted to Islam. During the ongoing civil war clans that claim alliance and common descent will often turn on one another and start the battle once again. Anthropologists and journalists are flabbergasted and have yet to completely map the dynamics of this system, other than to track a dynamic configuration of what looks like constantly changing alliances. These shifting alliances are central to the conflict and have so far prevented any "transitional" government from ruling more than the capital city of Mogadishu and some adjacent coastline. Even when Al Shabaab was pushed out of Kismayu port by the latest "transitional" government and its African Union allies, local clan warlords then started battling it out for control of this coastal town. Despite the turbulence and war in central and southern Somalia, Northern Somalia (Somaliland) is relatively quiet, has declared independence and is not yet recognized by any country in the United Nations (although Israel has offered recognition).

Throughout its history Somalia has comprised thriving coastal city-states and lineage based inland Sultanates which have both risen and fallen as a result of droughts, attacks by neighboring tribes or wider economic forces. It has and continues to be the custom for the young men of the tribe to herd camels and raid neighbors and so, we should not be surprised that the average age of a member of Al Shabaab corresponds to the traditional age when a young man would be out herding and raiding, as they used to do when Somali nomads lived in a more traditional manner.

The ongoing Somali civil war, the flooding of the country with machine guns, the Somali population explosion (it has quadrupled in fifty years), the droughts and periodic starvation have all amplified the violence and tragedy that was once played out with preindustrial technology such as spears and swords. The civil war is also aggravated by paradoxical economic trends such as the spread of an efficient cell phone system (that has flourished because of no government regulation and is a great way to organize a militia of herders). A flourishing livestock export boom parallels the slow penetration of foreign Al Qaeda fighters among native Jihadists, and whose profits may be fed back to pay for the guns and salaries that support the militias.

On the south western frontiers of Somalia, the suppression of the slave trade by the early 20th century allowed the British to settle the highlands around Kenya and convert the largely Bantu and Nilotic Kenyans to Christianity. During the 1960s when "the winds of change" blew over Africa, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania became independent. Although these countries have subsequently gone through periods of socialism, dictatorship and more recently multi party democracy, tension and conflict between coastal-based Swahili Muslims and Somalis aching to regain their former dominance, and the Bantu and Nilotes of the interior, continues (Al Shabaab planted a bomb in Kampala in July 2010 killing over seventy and wounding even more).

To accept at face value the claim that Al Shabaab attacked the supermarket in Nairobi as a response to the Kenyan army's incursions into its northern border with southern Somalia, is to misread the underlying causes of this conflict and the motivation behind Al Shabaab's latest attack (they have also been responsible for some recent grenade attacks in Nairobi as well).

No doubt, we will discover that Al Shabaab was able to carry out this attack because their members and supporters can quickly disappear into Nairobi's economically thriving Somali community who predominate in their suburb of the city called Eastleigh, which I have visited many times. Eastleigh is also home to the numerous rosters of Somali politicians who claim at various times to comprise the "government in exile" of this failed state. Eastleigh is also the economic hub of the expanding Somali economy, which despite continuous intertribal and inter clan warfare in what was once Somalia, is doing well, now that there are no government restrictions and the market is free. One journalist has joked that the economic results of the ongoing Somali civil war, although a humanitarian catastrophe with a high death rate, has succeeded in liberalizing the economy and is the equivalent of a World Bank structural adjustment program.

But Eastleigh is also the source of a more pernicious source of authority for Al Shabaab. It is home to a young radical Islamic Somali Kenyan cleric by the name of Hassan Mahad Omar AKA

Hassaan Hussein Adam "Abu Salman" and who the members of the Al Shabaab look up to as their exclusive mufti or religious scholar and who issues his own "fatwas," i.e. religious decrees on what they should and should not do, and whom they should and should not attack. He is a suave, English speaking man in his mid-thirties who was educated in Saudi Arabia. On July 28, 2011 the United Nations Security Council Committee put him on its sanctions list. It is understood that he is an active fundraiser for Al Shabaab and although arrested once by the Kenyan authorities, as he never personally carries arms, he is free to move around Nairobi and Kenya.

Abu Salman's declaration can bring a quick death to those in the "movement" that he deems "disloyal." Although Al Shabaab has a distinct Jihadist ideology and is an expression of one kind of Somali identity, its leaders have been factionalized. The present leader is a young man named Ahmed Abdi Godane. Supported by a fatwa from Abu Salman, Godane directed the assassination of his rivals in Al Shabaab and took control of the organization. As one of his goals was an attack on Kenya, Abu Salman then gave Godane the blessing for the Nairobi attack. This is linked in a deep and abiding way to the long-term goals of the Darod clan to which Abu Salman belongs, and who predominate in southern Somalia, the heartland of Al Shabaab on the ground. The Darod have long term agenda *vis à vis* what is now Kenya.

From just before 1900 as the British began to establish their authority over highland Kenya and coastal Somalia, nomads of the Darod clan were migrating southwest in search of better pastures and room to expand. In what is now northeastern Kenya they came across "pagan" pastoral nomads like themselves, who had migrated down from southern Ethiopia during the last five hundred years. The numerically inferior Somalis would become the clients of these dominant non-Muslim tribes. They would bide their time, grow their herds, expand the number of spear bearing youth and then turn on their hosts violently. According to oral tradition Somali tribal leaders justified this pattern (called "shegat" or clientage in Somali) as a form of stealth Jihad against these "pagan nomads" and so, by the time of Kenyan independence Somali nomads constituted 60% of the population of what is now northeastern Kenya.

In 1963 as Kenyan independence overlapped that of an independent Somalia (1960), the new Somali flag made up of five stars representing a hoped for "Greater Somalia," included the Somali minorities in eastern Ethiopia (the Ethiopian held Ogaden which Somalia invaded in 1977) and which incorporates what is now north-eastern Kenya. For a decade, the Somali tribes of northern Kenya fought a guerilla war against the Kenyan authorities until they were pacified by the newly established, British advised Kenyan Army (formerly the Kings African Rifles). Since then the Somali Darod clans of northeastern Kenya and Southern Somalia have been steadily moving south and southwest from Mandera and Garissa (northeast Kenya) into

Marsabit and Isiolo districts at the foot of mount Kenya, having converted their former Oromo clients to Islam. Northern Kenya's arid desert wastes are now divided between expanding Somali clans coming from the north and north east and the non-Muslim pastoral nomads of the West, such as the Turkana and Samburu, whose elites are well represented in Nairobi, who have converted to Christianity and, do not want a Sharia based state brought about by the descendants of these former slave trading tribes.

The young terrorists from Al Shabaab who carried out the attack on the Westgate are part of an Al Qaeda inspired breakaway faction of Somalis (including expatriate Somalis from the West and some other fighters from different nationalities), dominated by young Somali men who in olden times would have been spear chucking raiders and slavers. These young men have broken away from the recently organized and disbanded "Islamic courts" movement in central and southern Somalia, which during the more than two decades old and ongoing civil war, emerged as a Sharia based, somewhat grass roots opposition to the warlords who dominated the civil war that began with the downfall of former Somali dictator Siad Barre in the early 1990s. Older men dominated the Islamic courts. Young men, including Canadians and Americans of Somali descent have been joining Al Shabaab, and there now is great concern in the American and Canadian Somali communities that some of their "missing youth" have gone to fight for Al Shabaab.

As we can now see, these facts are just the latest externals, or the particulars, of a more ancient and deeper conflict which according to the international community was supposed to end when the majority of Somalis were brought under their own independent government in 1960, when the United Nations recognized the new state of Somalia made up of the northern (British administered) and southern (Italian administered) Somali lands. (The enclave of Djibouti opted to stay under the French and eventually gained its independence in 1977).

Having spent five years in Northern Kenya and having visited and worked with the Somali tribes in Mandera province (which borders on southern Somalia, home of the Darod) during a peak in the civil war in Somalia in April 1994 I was asked by the Canadian High Commissioner to Kenya to give a closed session presentation to visiting Canadian and American military officers on tour from the National Defense College of Canada on the crisis in the Horn and East Africa. I explained why the Somalis claim northern Kenya and that they would still like to incorporate it into a Greater Somalia. I argued that Kenya would have to actively develop the arid north of their country if they were to keep the country unified. Colonial administrator Sir Richard Turnbull first made this argument in an article that he wrote for the *Kenya Police Review* in 1957. The title of the article was, "The Darod Invasion."

On September 11 2013, the Kenyan government announced that scientists had discovered an

enormous underground lake in Turkana district in northern Kenya. This aquifer contains 250 billion cubic meters of water. The amount of water which can be drawn from this each year, is thought to be 3.4 billion cubic meters, is nearly three times the consumption of water for all of New York City. This fact should completely change the future of northern Kenya, as it would allow for massive internal migration from the Nilotic and Bantu parts of the country and, the possible establishment of an ultra modern, ranch based livestock economy, which would allow Kenya to become a major competitor to the Somalis in Somalia proper. This could put to rest the concept of a "greater Somalia" once and for all.

If the Kenyan government misses out on this development opportunity (they have the expertise and allies to pull it off and Israel could be very helpful here) one day, Kenyans may wake up to find that Somali nomads have become the main inhabitants of two thirds of their country. The Darod invasion will have succeeded and a large part of a country that was formerly a friend of Israel and the West will have fallen into the hands of those who want it destroyed.

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