



# Foiled Nairobi Terror Plot



*Product of the Research & Information Support Center (RISC)*

April 23, 2018

## Executive Summary

On March 14, the Kenyan Police Inspector General announced that a sophisticated, large-scale terrorist plot against a number of targets in Nairobi had been thwarted by Kenyan police in February. Al-Shabaab remains the most potent terrorist threat to travelers and U.S. interests in East Africa, and the group likely seeks to increase its frequency of attacks in Kenya. Further, al-Shabaab maintains the resolve to conduct attacks in Nairobi specifically, as it is considered a highly attractive target for a mass casualty attack and the desired publicity such an attack on the capital would garner; however, the threat is not confined to any area, and al-Shabaab continues to express its intent to conduct attacks/kidnappings of Westerners anywhere in Kenya.

## Intercepted Plot

On February 15, police officers intercepted five suspects traveling by vehicle in Merti, a rural town located in Isiolo County, about 200 miles northeast of Nairobi. After an exchange of gunfire between police and the suspects, one suspect was shot and killed, two suspects escaped, and two suspects were arrested. The intercepted vehicle, which was determined to be heading for Nairobi, was fitted with explosives and reportedly contained a jihadist militant flag, as well as a cache of weapons including 35 grenades, 36 loaded magazines, 18 IEDs, and five AK-47s.

Subsequent [reporting](#) indicated that one of the suspects had in his possession a keycard for the Delta Hotel in Nairobi, where he was renting a room. According to Kenya's Inspector General of Police, the assailants intended to target the Supreme Court, where they allegedly planned to carry out an armed assault in order to free one of their jailed companions during his court proceedings scheduled to take place at that time. The individual was identified as Muslim cleric Sheikh Guyo Gorsa, who is currently in custody over various terror-related charges. The identification of numerous targets throughout downtown Nairobi indicates that the suspects intended to cause maximum casualties and damage.

## Al-Shabaab: Shifting Strategies?

In recent years, al-Shabaab's targeting has focused primarily on Somali and Kenyan security forces, with the majority of attacks taking place in Somalia and across the border in northeastern Kenya. Over the last year, there has been an uptick in attacks occurring in the Kenya-Somalia border areas, especially ambush-style attacks on vehicle convoys. Of the 23 terrorist attacks [reported in 2017](#), the bulk of these incidents occurred in Wajir, Garissa, Lamu, and Mandera counties and involved shootings, grenades, or other explosive devices. The most recent attack in Lamu occurred on January 13 when [al-Shabaab militants ambushed two police vehicles](#) that were escorting a convoy of buses in the Nyangoro area.

February's ambitious attempt may suggest a potential shift in strategy with a focus on more complex, coordinated attacks indiscriminately targeting innocent civilians. Al-Shabaab's most frequently used tactic over the past five years has been to conduct armed attacks. By contrast, the attempted attack on Nairobi in February was highly complex and coordinated in nature, designed to include the combination of an armed assault with the simultaneous detonation of numerous explosive devices. The recently disrupted

plot signals a level of sophistication not witnessed by the group since the [2013 Westgate attack](#), which was also a complex and coordinated attack that targeted a public place in Nairobi. Moreover, the thwarted February plot also serves as a reminder that hard targets in Nairobi, such as the government installations that were targeted, are not immune from the risk of coordinated attacks.

In addition, the presence of al-Shabaab operatives and/or sympathizers already in Kenya presents an internal threat. For instance, the prime suspect in the foiled February attack reportedly was able to obtain fake documents and resources through the assistance of several Kenyans. Considering that the Muslim Youth Center (located in the Majengo district of Nairobi) has [historically been used as a recruitment base for al-Shabaab](#), potential radicalization of Muslim youth in the country -- especially those who feel socially and economically marginalized -- remains a significant concern.

Challenges remain for Kenyan security forces in their ability to detect and disrupt al-Shabaab activity. Notably, the police reportedly indicated that the foiled February attack was identified as a result of a routine police patrol, and was not a counterterrorism operation. The fact that the suspects were able to enter the country and obtain fake documents highlights security gaps that could be exploited by al-Shabaab.

### **Implications and Guidance**

Per the Department of State's [Travel Advisory](#), the rating for Kenya is considered to be "Level 2 – Exercise Increased Caution," largely due to both the high rate of crime and the high risk of terrorism. Due to the extremely high risk of terrorism and the specific threat posed by al-Shabaab, the U.S. Embassy recommends travelers avoid travel to these counties that border Somalia: Mandera, Wajir, and Garissa, as well as the coastal areas: Tana River county, areas of Kilifi county north of Malindi, and Lamu County. The U.S. government continues to receive information regarding potential terrorist threats aimed at U.S., Western, and Kenyan interests including in the Nairobi area and in the coastal areas. However, the threat is not confined to those areas and al-Shabaab specifically continues to express its intent and capability to conduct attacks/kidnappings of Westerners anywhere in the country.

More broadly, the threat of terrorism in East Africa is not limited to al-Shabaab. Although the likelihood of ISIS organizing large-scale attacks in the region is currently low, there is a potential for homegrown, violent extremist attacks perpetrated by a single, self-radicalized person inspired by ISIS but with no official affiliation or support from the group. The threat of radicalization and recruitment of vulnerable populations throughout the region is possible. In addition, even if the number is relatively small, any foreign fighters that might possibly return to their home countries from the conflict zone in Libya, Iraq, or Syria could bring with them the experience and training they gained from the battlefield. There is also concern that once foreign fighters do return home, if they are unable to find legitimate employment, they will be significantly more susceptible to joining other radical or criminal organizations.

As such, U.S. private-sector organizations with operations and personnel in Kenya should ensure they have robust security and emergency response measures in place to mitigate evolving terrorist threats in an increasingly dynamic security environment. Travelers should exercise vigilance when in public places or using mass transportation, be aware of immediate surroundings and avoid crowded places, monitor media and local event information sources, and factor updated information into travel plans and activities. In addition, travelers should consider avoiding high-density Western shopping malls and

---

*The contents of this (U) presentation in no way represent the policies, views, or attitudes of the United States Department of State, or the United States Government, except as otherwise noted (e.g., travel advisories, public statements). The presentation was compiled from various open sources and (U) embassy reporting. Please note that all OSAC products are for internal U.S. private sector security purposes only. Publishing or otherwise distributing OSAC-derived information in a manner inconsistent with this policy may result in the discontinuation of OSAC support.*

venues, at least during peak times, and in other areas that typically have lower security measures and where large crowds of people gather.

### **Additional Resources**

Please direct any questions regarding this report or the general security situation in Kenya to [OSAC's East and Southern Africa Analyst](#).

[Kenya 2018 Crime and Safety Report](#)

[Kenya Travel Advisory](#)

[UK FCO Kenya Travel Advice](#)

OSAC Analysis: [Al-Shabaab & ISIL: The Current State of East African Terrorism](#) (October 2016)

OSAC Analysis: [Nairobi Westgate Mall Attack](#) (September 2013)

---

*The contents of this (U) presentation in no way represent the policies, views, or attitudes of the United States Department of State, or the United States Government, except as otherwise noted (e.g., travel advisories, public statements). The presentation was compiled from various open sources and (U) embassy reporting. Please note that all OSAC products are for internal U.S. private sector security purposes only. Publishing or otherwise distributing OSAC-derived information in a manner inconsistent with this policy may result in the discontinuation of OSAC support.*