MALI AND SOMALIA: AL-QAEDA AFFILIATES COORDINATED CLAIMS POINT TO COORDINATION WITH CORE AL-QAEDA

Brian M. Perkins

The release of a video message from al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, on February 5 is the latest in a series of events over the past several months that indicate al-Qaeda has increased coordination among its global affiliates and is still a preeminent global threat (Jihadology, February 5). The video itself is not out of the ordinary as Zawahiri commonly releases similar video and audio messages, but the release comes in the wake of several other notable developments, including the release of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence's (ODNI) annual Worldwide Threat Assessment. [1]

The ODNI assessment noted, "Al-Qa'ida senior leaders are strengthening the network's global command structure and continuing to encourage attacks against the West."[2] The assessment also noted the strength of al-Qaeda groups in East and North Africa, the Sahel, and Yemen. The coordination between al-Qaeda affiliates

and core al-Qaeda leaders was again made evident in late January.

On January 15, al-Shabaab conducted an attack in Nairobi just five days before the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin—JNIM) launched an attack on a UN base in Aguelhok in northern Mali (Standard Digital, January 16; Malijet, January 20). The attacks were carried out by different al-Qaeda affiliates thousands of miles away and were not tactically similar: al-Shabaab targeted a civilian hotel and business complex popular with Westerners while JNIM targeted the Chadian contingent of UN peacekeepers. The two attacks, however, had more in common than was immediately apparent, as evidenced by both group's claims of responsibility.

Al-Shabaab released an official statement on January 16 claiming responsibility for the attack, which the group dubbed "Al-Qudsu Lan Tuhawwad (Jerusalem will never be Judaized)" (Jihadology, January 16). The group also claimed it carried out the attack in accordance with Zawahiri's guidelines to target Western and Zionist interests in support of their Muslim brothers in Palestine.

Similarly, JNIM released an official statement on January 20 titled "Al-Quds Will Never be Judaized – The Aguelhok Battle…Standing in the Face of Normalization" ([Jihadology](#), January 20). In the statement, JNIM also claimed to have carried out the attack in response to Zawahiri's guidelines and as revenge for Chadian President Idriss Deby hosting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Chad the same week.

The use of the same language in the claims of responsibility as well as the timing of both attacks is in line with the assessment that core al-Qaeda is increasing its command structure over its affiliates. While core al-Qaeda might not have a hand in the day to day operations of its affiliates, Zawahiri and other key al-Qaeda leaders are undoubtedly still pulling strings from behind the scenes. It is unclear if core al-Qaeda was involved in target selection, but the attacks and the claims of responsibility indicate that it remains capable of steering attacks and the group's overarching narrative. Zawahiri's most recent video also included quotes that were used in both JNIM and al-Shabaab's claims of responsibility. In the coming year, it is likely that there will be an increase in coordinated attacks such as these, claimed by the more mobile affiliates and those that have managed to expand their reach as of late, such as AQIM, JNIM, and al-Shabaab. Meanwhile, core al-Qaeda is likely to focus more heavily on providing strategic support for its affiliates that are waning due to competition among rival groups or overcrowded battlefields rather than drawing additional focus to them.

Notes

[1] Office of the Director of National Intelligence's (ODNI) Annual Worldwide Threat Assessment. https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Testimonies/2018-ATA---Unclassified-SSCI.pdf

[2] Ibid. See page 10.

MALDIVES: THREAT OF RETURNING FIGHTERS DURING POLITICAL TRANSITION

Brian M. Perkins

The announcement that the United States plans to withdraw its troops from Syria by April has sparked significant concern regarding the return of Islamic State (IS) fighters that have been captured in Syria as well as those that return as IS' territory shrinks ([Reuters](#), February 8). Media reports have predominantly focused on the threat returning fighters pose to Europe, particularly France as it has the largest contingent of IS fighters in Europe. While the threat these individuals pose to Europe is existential and has been demonstrated by past attacks, most European countries have well-coordinated intelligence agencies and security forces that can help, to a certain extent, track and neutralize returning fighters. Countries such as the Maldives, which lack the infrastructure to do so or that have more volatile political and social climates, face a much more daunting task.

The Maldives, a small predominantly Muslim archipelago in the Indian ocean, has increasingly grappled with radicalization and political upheaval. The Maldives is home to one of the largest per capita contingents of individuals who have traveled to fight alongside IS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) among others in both Iraq and Syria ([Jihadology](#), May 11, 2015; [SITE](#), November 9, 2018). Several hundred Maldivians are believed to be fighting alongside foreign terrorist organizations and several have achieved prominence among their various groups.

Unlike France and more well-developed nations, the Maldives does not have the same level of counter-terrorism expertise. Additionally, intense political turmoil and an increasingly polarized religious environment make the Maldives particularly vulnerable to the threat posed by an influx of well-trained and radicalized fighters. The country's anti-terrorism laws have primarily been used to crack down on the political opposition and it is unclear how effective they would be in more official cases.

Former president Abdulla Yameen's appointment in November 2013 marked the return of a conservative fundamentalist view of Islam and the country. The Maldivian government quickly took controversial steps to cement Sunni Islam as the only religion in the Maldives and expanded religious programs and funding. As the coun-

try's ties with Saudi Arabia increased, there was also a notable increase in the number of mosques espousing a more radical Wahabbist ideology. IS and other terrorist groups have also managed to foster strong recruitment networks within the Maldives, both online and offline.

Yameen, however, lost the September 2018 presidential election to opposition leader Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, marking a move way from the contentious policies that helped foment radical Islamic leanings and marginalize opposition groups and secular voices. Solih has still confirmed his commitment to ensuring the Maldives remains Islamic and it is unclear how his policies will address the rise of radical ideologies and the damage that has already been done over the past six years.

On February 7, the EU confirmed its commitment to help the Maldives counter-terrorism within the country, timing that is consistent with renewed concerns over the return of foreign fighters ([Maldives Times](#), February 7). However, the political transition from Yameen to Solih is likely to be rocky as the latter gains his footing at a time when the country is in dire financial straits and the return of foreign fighters grows increasingly likely. Given the growth of radical Islamic teachings and anti-Western views, it is likely that returning fighters will find a permissible recruiting ground and outlets to spread their ideology.

Brian Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor

Cathedral Attack in Southern Philippines Shows Resilience of Pro-Islamic State Groups

James Brandon

Militants in the southern Philippines carried out one of the largest attacks in over a year on January 27 when they conducted a twin bombing on the main cathedral in the city of Jolo, the capital of Muslim-majority Sulu province and one of the main heartlands of the militant Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) network. The first bomb exploded inside the church during mass, and 12 to 15 seconds later a second bomb exploded outside its entrance. The devices were reportedly detonated by cell phones and were wrapped in galvanized steel sheets that both concealed the devices and acted as shrapnel, a method commonly used by local insurgents ([Rappler](#), January 28). The blasts killed 17 civilians and six security personnel—most of the latter were killed by the second blast as they responded to the first explosion. Islamic State (IS)'s Amaq news agency claimed credit for the explosions, although it incorrectly claimed that the attack was conducted by two suicide bombers.

This was the single most fatal attack in the southern Philippines since a pro-IS faction of ASG— known as the Maute Group after the two Maute brothers who led it— seized the city of Marawi in southern Mindanao in May 2017, holding it for five months until defeated by the military. The Philippines security forces investigating the incident said that a known ASG militant, Alias Kamah, was caught on surveillance footage outside the church shortly before the blasts ([Philippine News Agency](#), January 29). They added that he is the brother of Surakah Ingog, a former leader of an ASG sub-group known as Ajang-Ajang and said that others involved in the bombing appear to be relatively young individuals related to other deceased militants. This assessment is highly plausible, as ASG networks have historically been based on close kinship links, as illustrated by the Maute Brothers themselves. The authorities had also recently blamed the Ajang-Ajang group for a small bombing at a mall in Cotabatu City, also in Mindanao, on New Year's Eve ([ABS-CBN](#), December 31, 2018).

The timing of the latest attack is almost certainly related to the major referendum held in southern Mindanao six

days earlier on January 21 on whether to ratify the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), which would create a new autonomous region—Bangsamoro Autonomous Region—in southern Mindanao. This will grant significant autonomy to many Muslim-majority areas and allow a limited application of Sharia law. The government hopes these concessions will help dampen long-standing Islamist separatist insurgencies in the area. Overall, the BOL was approved by 89 percent of those who voted. However, in Sulu province, where the Jolo attack occurred, 53 percent voted against the proposal, spurred by strong opposition from local political, ethnic, and religious leaders.

The "no" vote in Sulu partly reflects fears by the locally dominant Tausug ethnic group that they would be marginalized in the new, larger autonomous region by members of the Maguindanao ethnic group. This group is particularly worried about being sidelined by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a Maguindanao-dominated Islamist insurgent group which signed a peace deal with Manila in 1996, and has since been the government's key partner in the creation of the new autonomous region. The "no" vote also reflects local nostalgia for the largely independent Sulu Sultanate, which existed from 1405 to the early 1900s, and this historical memory continues to fuel separatist and ethno-nationalist feeling in Sulu. Despite this opposition, however, Sulu will nonetheless be incorporated in the new autonomous region, as it was already part of the area's smaller existing autonomous zone. This is seen in Sulu as an injustice and has aroused considerable anger.

The high profile attack on the cathedral was, therefore, likely an attempt by ethnic Tausug ASG members to demonstrate the group's opposition to the unpopular new agreement, to show its defiance of the national government (as exemplified in this instance by the Church and Christians, who are seen by most Sulu locals as foreign incomers from northern areas), and depicting itself as willing to defend Tausug aspirations toward greater independence and an eventual restoration of the Sulu Sultanate. For ASG, the attack is a way to reassert their relevance during a time of dramatic political change, to appeal to members of the local population aggrieved by the referendum outcome and to position themselves as defenders of Sulu's historical memory and its aspirations to regain sovereignty in the future. This agenda neatly dovetails with ASG's own more religiously-inspired vision of declaring an independent "Islamic state" in the area and imposing a hardline form of Sharia law.

The attack was heavily driven by local ethnic and political factors, and the role of IS itself appears highly limited. The group's online claim via Amaq—which is likely run by IS militants in Iraq, Syria or Turkey—likely reflects some contact with ASG members in Sulu. Either ASG or IS members may have deliberately mischaracterized the attack as a suicide bombing in order to inflate its significance. The unusually large death toll, however, does not indicate increased militant capabilities deriving from any returning foreign fighters or closer links with militants abroad. Instead, the attack was a politically-motivated decision to use existing bomb-making skills to strike a soft civilian target rather than government or military assets, which is more common in Sulu.

That said, the attack shows that ASG militants in the southern Philippines will continue to evolve and seek to take advantage of local political developments and exploit ethnic rivalries while leveraging the IS brand to raise their profile locally and internationally to attract foreign funding and recruits, particularly from regional sympathizers in Australia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and to a lesser extent the Middle East. Meanwhile, IS will continue to benefit from its relationship with ASG groups as this enables its beleaguered leaders to claim that they continue to enjoy support from Muslims around the world, which they can in turn leverage for their own fundraising and recruitment.

Philippine militants will continue to win support in fringe areas where they can exploit local issues—such as Sulu in the much larger southern Mindanao area. However, the planned launch of the new Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in 2022 along with the resulting increase in autonomy and some implementation of Sharia is likely to significantly undercut support for militancy, especially among the Maguindanao ethnic group, as occurred when Indonesia granted similar concessions in its own restive province of Aceh in 2005. Although much will depend on the success of this new regional administration, particularly its ability to effectively represent the area's full range of ethnic groups, this development is likely to reduce the appeal of pro-IS groups in these wider areas over time.

James Brandon is a Director at Falanx Assynt, a geo-political and cyber risk consultancy based in London.

Islamic State-Inspired Extremist Threat Looms Large in India

Animesh Roul

Despite massive territorial losses and military setbacks in the Middle East, the violent ideals espoused by Islamic State (IS) remain resilient and seem to be resonating in the hearts and minds of a section of inspired Indian Muslims. After a brief lull in IS-inspired or directed events in the country, Indian security agencies have unearthed multiple covert pro-IS networks, foiling conspiracies to carry out terrorist attacks targeting vital and sensitive installations and sites in and around the national capital, New Delhi, and places in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra States.

In late December 2018, the National Investigation Agency (NIA)—India's elite anti-terrorism agency—conducted a major joint operation with Delhi and Uttar Pradesh police to crack down on pro-IS activities in the country. During the operation, authorities arrested at least 10 people belonging to an IS-inspired group called Harkat-ul-Harb-e-Islam (HuHI). The ring leader of the HuHI was identified as Muhammed Suhail (a.k.a. Hazrath), a native of Amroha city in Uttar Pradesh where he is engaged as a mufti (Islamic jurist) in a madrasa located at Hakim Mahtab Uddin Hashmi Road (Rediff.com, December 26, 2018).

Other members of HuHI were identified as Anas Yunus, Rashid Zafar Raq, Raees Ahmad and Zubair Malik. Further investigation of the case is still ongoing in order to unearth the extent of this IS-inspired terrorism conspiracy in the country.

The initial investigations by NIA indicated that Muhammed Suhail—who lives near Delhi—along with his associates from nearby towns mobilized funds and logistics to carry out bombings and suicide attacks at places of importance in and around the national capital. [1] Police have seized large quantities of explosive materials (Potassium Nitrate, Ammonium Nitrate, Sulphur, etc.), arms and ammunition, including one locally made rocket/grenade launcher; and IS literature while carrying out search and sweep operations in Jaffrabad and Seelampur, Delhi, as well as in Amroha, Lucknow, Hapur, and Meerut, Uttar Pradesh (United News of India, December 26, 2018).

Almost a month after a cell in Amroha was exposed, the NIA and Maharashtra police discovered another IS-inspired cell operating under the banner of Ummat-e-Mohammadiya (UeM) on January 22. The UeM's networks, which spanned from Thane to Aurangabad in Maharashtra, have been involved in plotting terror attacks across India. Investigations into the case revealed that the group has devised new tactics to poison food and water sources at religious gatherings and to provoke communal violence. There has been suspicion that the UeM's chemical attack plot would be targeting the Kumbh Mela gatherings (Hindu pilgrimage) in Uttar Pradesh or water pipelines in Mumbai. However, the investigating agencies have yet to verify these theories.

In a similar IS-related development in November 2017, Kerala police issued an alert to the Thrissur railway station about possible poisoning of Sabarimala Temple pilgrims by Islamic State terrorists. The alert was based on a Malayalam language audio clip from the IS operative Rashid Abdullah, the leader of the Kasaragod IS cell who had left to join Islamic State in Afghanistan (Hindustan Times, March 12, 2017). Rashid purportedly called for war against India and lone-wolf terror attacks on crowds thronging Hindu religious events like the Kumbh Mela and Thrissur festivals (Outlook India, November 27, 2017).

According to senior police official Mohan Dahikar, the UeM members are well educated (engineers and pharmacists) and are in touch with an unidentified Islamic State operative based out of India (Times Now News, January 23). The arrested members of the IS-inspired UeM group are Salman Khan, Fahad Shah, Zamen Kutepadi, Mohammad Mazhar Shaikh among others. The police suspected that Mohseen Khan, the elder of three brothers involved in UeM, was perhaps in touch with a propaganda cell of IS. There have also been media reports linking the arrested individuals to the Popular Front of India (PFI) in Kerala (The Hindu, January 23). Reports have recently alleged that the Popular Front of India (PFI)—a radical Islamic organization involved in proselytizing and illegal financing—is connected with IS, as several members have travelled to Syria and Afghanistan to join the group (India Today, November 2, 2017). Last December, the Kerala police confirmed at least ten people from the southern state had joined the

Islamic State-Khurasan (IS-K) in Afghanistan and some were former PFI members (Indiatimes.com, December 14, 2018). While the investigations into these IS-inspired cases are ongoing, those arrested have been charged under various sections of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and Indian Penal Code's Section dealing with criminal conspiracy against the State.

In Maharashtra state, the UeM is the second IS-inspired organization intercepted by the security agencies. In January 2016, the Anti-terrorism squad of Maharashtra police and NIA busted the Junood-e-Khalifa-e-Hind (JeKH) group with the arrest of 15 operatives across the country. The JeKH—which was organized by IS recruiter and fugitive member of the Indian Mujahideen terrorist group, Shafi Armar—had managed to expand its activities mostly in the southwestern states of Kerala, Karnataka and Maharashtra. Armar, who was also the online handler for IS, was involved in radicalizing Muslim youths in India from his hideouts in Syria. He even appointed several of JeKH's core operatives, such as Mudabbir Sheikh from Mumbra, Maharashtra as emir-e-hind (chief) of JeKH's India operation, Rizwan as deputy chief, and Najmal Huda as operations commander (Times of India, February 9, 2016).

For the first time, in May 2016, a video message from the Islamic State featuring its Indian brigade purportedly located in the 'Homs' province (Wilāyat Ḥimṣ) titled "The Bilad al-Hind (Land of India): Between Pain and Hope" called Indian Muslims to travel to Syria (hijra) and join IS. [2] The message apparently threatened to wage jihad against India and to take revenge for the atrocities against Indian Muslims in Kashmir, the demolition of Babri Masjid, and for the communal riots in Gujarat and Muzaffarnagar. The video message was aimed at recruiting more Indian fighters and promoting how those in the Caliphate (Syria and Iraq) live in peace and harmony while fighting for the cause of Allah (DNA India, May 21, 2016; The Hindu, May 24, 2016).

In comparison to other countries where hundreds or thousands of individuals have flocked to IS-controlled territories, India has far fewer militants fighting with Islamic State and does not currently face a significant threat from the group or its returning fighters. However, since mid-2014, Indian security agencies have been intercepting, arresting, and counseling several IS sympathizers, supporters, and operatives in the country. According to a former director of the Intelligence Bureau

(IB), only about 108 Indian Muslims have joined IS and half of them were from the Indian diaspora communities in Middle Eastern countries (Times of India, December 7, 2018). Another important dataset, compiled largely from open sources by the South Asia Terrorism Portal, depicted a detailed breakdown of IS sympathizers and operatives who have either been arrested or traveled to Syria and Iraq. It estimated a total of 261 people have demonstratively sympathized or been inspired by IS' ideology through 2018. Among them, 88 have traveled to IS strongholds in the Middle East and Afghanistan and 25 have been killed while fighting there (SATP.org, December 31, 2018).

Although India does not face a significant foreign fighter threat, the fact that IS' outreach efforts continue to have ideological traction within India is worrisome. The IS brand has certainly been inspiring both existing and dormant Islamists, mostly those affiliated with the defunct Indian Mujahideen or banned Student Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) and including a section of radicalized individuals. India's elite anti-terrorism agencies may have thwarted the plots of IS-inspired Islamists from HuHI or UeM, but India still has countless subdued militant groups that are likely waiting to rear their heads at any opportune moment while taking inspiration from transnational jihadist groups like IS.

Animesh Roul is the executive director of the New Delhi-based policy research group Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict. He specializes in counterterrorism, radical Islam, terror financing, and armed conflict and violence in South Asia. Mr. Roul has written extensively on these subject areas, being published in edited books, journals, and policy magazines.

NOTES

[1] "NIA crackdown on ISIS cell 'Harkat-ul- Harb-e-Islam' NIA Press Release, December 26, 2018, http://www.nia.gov.in/writereaddata/Portal/PressReleaseNew/630_1_Pr.pdf
[2] New video message from The Islamic State: "The Land of India: Between Pain and Hope – Wilāyat Ḥimṣ", Jihadology.net, May 19, 2016, https://jihadology.net/2016/05/19/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-the-land-of-india-between-pain-and-hope-wilayat

Nairobi's DusitD2 Attack: Is al-Shabaab Engaged in a Tactical War or is it a Desperate Force?

Sunguta West

Despite facing increased pressure from Africa Union (AU) troops and constant U.S. military airstrikes, al-Shabaab successfully staged a deadly strike in Nairobi, further illustrating the militant group's resilience and its ability to strike across the border.

On January 15, four gunmen armed with AK-47s and grenades and backed by one suicide bomber stormed DusitD2, an upscale business complex on Nairobi's 14 Riverside Drive, killing 21 people and injuring 28. When the siege ended, the government announced that more than 700 people had been rescued (Pulse Live, January 16; Standard Digital, January 16).

Al-Shabaab, the Somalia-based al-Qaeda affiliate in East Africa, claimed responsibility for the attack. In a statement attributed to al-Shabaab spokesman Abdiaziz Abu Musab, the group claimed it had sent its gunmen to attack the complex as retaliation to U.S. President Donald Trump's declaration of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Kenya was among the countries that joined the opening of the U.S. Embassy in the Middle Eastern city in May last year. At the time, analysts warned that Kenya's presence at the opening put the country at risk of attack by terrorists. Ten days before the opening, the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi issued a travel advisory warning of possible attacks (The Star, January 17).

Analysts have debated why al-Shabaab chose to target DusitD2, which is considered one of the most secure hotels and business complexes in Kenya. It was likely chosen due to its proximity to Western embassies and the presence of Westerners. Three foreign missions—German, Dutch and Australian—share the neighborhood with the complex, making it a popular spot for diplomats (Daily Nation, January 17).

As the dust settles on yet another terrorist attack in Nairobi, questions are emerging of whether al-Shabaab is engaged in a tactical war or if it is a declining force that is desperately seeking relevance.

Five years ago, al-Shabaab staged a similar attack at the Westgate, an upscale shopping mall in the same district. The gunmen killed 67 and injured more than 200. In 2015, the militant group also struck Garissa University College killing 148, mainly Christian students. Al-Shabaab later claimed that it ordered the attack as revenge for Kenyan troops' continued presence in Somalia. The troops are part of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISIOM), the military campaign seeking to eliminate the Islamist group from Somalia.

With the DusitD2 attack, it is also evident that Kenyan security agencies have learned key lessons on the execution of operations in response to such attacks. A quick and well-coordinated response disrupted the terrorists' actions, resulting in countless lives being saved.

According to security experts, the response to the Westgate Shopping Mall attack was characterized by confusion and chaos, while agencies were delayed in responding to the Garissa University attack. The lack of coordination and the delay in the two resulted in a higher number of casualties. In the DusitD2 response, all security units were put under a singular command, allowing for a smooth execution of the operation (The Star, January 17; Daily Nation, January 18).

Before the latest attack, the militant group's activities were concentrated in the north-eastern region near the border of Somalia. The militant group had targeted police on patrol, communication installations, and other soft targets. Its presence at the border region is attributed to the ongoing AMISOM military campaign in southern Somalia, which has pushed al-Shabaab toward the Kenyan border. More activities had also been witnessed in Boni forest in the coastal area of Lamu, where the group is believed to have bases (Standard Digital, October 15, 2018). While the attacks in these areas have passed as low-level, news reports indicate the al-Shabaab militants had also been attempting to strike Nairobi without success.

In February 2018, the police arrested gunmen traveling to carry out an attack in Nairobi and found a cache of arms including 36 grenades and five automatic rifles. The militants had assembled a Vehicle-Borne Improvised

Explosive Device (VBIED) to strike soft targets in Nairobi (Nairobi News, February 18, 2018).

Recently, Kenyan security services have made crucial gains against the terrorist group and its sympathizers. The services have curtailed cross-border movement, communication, and slowed down recruitment from Kenya. The latest actions at DusitD2, however, show that al-Shabaab is far from being defeated (The Star, October 3, 2018).

Under the police's watchful eye, the militant group has adopted new recruitment strategies. This has involved recruiting non-Muslims or recent converts from mainly poor neighborhoods and slums. That became evident after the DusitD2 attack, when two of the attackers were identified as recent converts to Islam who had been brainwashed and sent to Somalia for training. It has emerged that Ali Salim Gichunge, the lead attacker who was killed by security forces during the attack was from non-Muslim communities. He had lived in an informal settlement in Nyeri town, known as Majengo, where he is believed to have been recruited and radicalized (The Star, January 17).

Al-Shabaab's latest recruitment strategy can be traced to the activities of the group in Mombasa and the interventions of the Kenyan security services. In 2014, the agencies raided four mosques in Mombasa in a move intended to stop the breeding of terrorist cells in the coastal city. The mosques (*masjid*)—Musa, Sakina, Swafaa, and Mina in Majengo and Kisauni—were believed to be centers of youth radicalization and recruitment. In the raids, hundreds of radicalized youth were arrested, but a large number, many of whom are well-educated, also fled to Somalia to join al-Shabaab. After a few years of training, many of them snuck back to the country, where they recruit for the group (Daily Nation, January 3).

The returnees no longer recruit from mosques but have moved to other discreet places, such as informal settlements. Another recruitment channel is through social media networks and cyber cafes. Reports indicate that recruiters are targeting youths between the ages of 15 and 24 years old. The recruits are being enticed with a promise that they will be funded to join religious schools or madrassas. Others are promised lucrative jobs, but when they reach Somalia, the promise of well-paying jobs has turned out false (Daily Nation, February 3).

Overall, al-Shabaab has been weakened and disrupted after losing key territory, strategic towns, and seaports to AMISOM troops. The loss of territory has also meant the loss of crucial revenue needed to sustain its fighters, leaving the group desperate. At the same time, internal discontent and leadership disputes have left the group divided into factions. The division has also come at a bad time as Islamic State (IS) is shaping into a major competitor.

In recent months, the two militant groups have clashed in Bari, a mountainous region in the northeast. According to reports, al-Shabaab snuck its fighters into the mountains in December to reach IS hideouts. The ensuing fight forced IS fighters to retreat further into the mountains (Mareeg, January 28; Intelligence Briefs, January 29).

Apart from the battles with IS, al-Shabaab has continued to carry out attacks in other parts of Somalia. Although the group has been forced out of Mogadishu, it continues to mount frequent attacks in the city. On February 4, the group detonated a car bomb in a Mogadishu shopping mall, killing at least 11 people. A day before, gunmen had shot dead a senior manager of DP World, the Dubai-based global port operator, in the city of Bossasso in the semi-autonomous region of Puntland. Claiming responsibility, al-Shabaab said it had killed the official as part of its action to eliminate mercenaries who are looting the country's resources (Daily Nation, February 4). In January, the group used mortars to target a UN base in Mogadishu. Three people were injured in the afternoon attack (Daily Nation, January 2).

Al-Shabaab continues to strike military, government, and civilian targets in southern Somalia and controls large swathes of the region. Generally, the militant group remains lethal, with the ability to strike inside and outside of Somalia. As the threat it poses to its neighbors became visible once again with the DusitD2 attack, the danger al-Shabaab poses is not likely to diminish in the near future. This is partly due to competition, corruption, and poor coordination among Somali security services. Moreover, Somali government institutions are still weak, meaning they cannot effectively deliver services in all parts of the country. Where the government is not present, people turn to al-Shabaab for services it provides, such as food aid to drought-stricken communities.

Sunguta West is an independent journalist based in Nairobi.