



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

August 29, 2010

Is the US intelligence community misreading the Shabaab-Qaeda relationship?

by Deane-Peter Baker

In a recent report at *Long War Journal*¹ an unnamed senior U.S. intelligence official is quoted as saying that "Al Qaeda's top leadership has instructed Shabaab to maintain a low profile on al Qaeda links." This, according to the same official, is because "al Qaeda is applying lessons learned from Iraq, that an overexposure of the links between al Qaeda central leadership and its affiliates can cause some unwanted attention." The official added that "al Qaeda is pleased with the double suicide attack in Uganda, but suggested Shabaab reserve future strikes at US interests in the region."

Perhaps access to the intelligence sources available to the unnamed official would make it obvious to any analyst that this interpretation is correct. From an outsider's perspective, however, there are reasons to suspect that the intelligence community might, perhaps, have misread matters in this case. A possible alternative explanation is that al Qaeda's claim to be 'pleased' with the twin blasts that ripped through the Ugandan capital of Kampala on July 11 (killing 76), is more a statement of inter-terrorist group diplomacy than a proclamation of genuine pleasure. Arguably, the real bite of the communication (or perhaps 'clenched teeth' is a better image) comes in the 'suggestion' that future strikes of this kind be directed at US interests. Read thus, this intercepted communication sounds more like a politely phrased al Qaeda rebuke to a wayward partner than an attempt to protect al Shabaab from 'unwanted attention'.

It is important not to forget the context of the July 11 attacks. The bombings were timed and placed to inflict casualties on crowds watching the televised final of the FIFA Soccer World Cup. Held every four years, the FIFA Soccer World Cup is the world's biggest sporting event. The final was watched by an estimated 700 million people worldwide. It was therefore an obvious target for al-Qaeda, a terrorist organization much in need of a spectacular attack. The evidence suggests that an attack on the World Cup has been very much on the al-Qaeda agenda. In May, for example, Iraqi security officials announced that they had arrested a Saudi national, Abdullah Azzam Saleh Misfar al-Qahtani, who claims to have been involved in planning an attack on the World Cup in South Africa, allegedly in direct collusion with al-Qaeda number two Ayman Al Zawahiri.

The circumstances, too, seemed to weigh in al-Qaeda's favor. Despite significant measures having been put in place by South Africa's security forces, on balance an attack on the World Cup in South Africa must be considered to have been possible. South Africa's borders are notoriously porous, many of its officials are corrupt, and the tools of the terrorist trade are relatively easily accessible. Consider, for example, the astounding number of criminally-

¹ Bill Roggio *Long War Journal* August 15, 2010 'Al Qaeda advises Shabaab to keep low profile on links, attack US interests' (http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/08/al_qaeda_advises_sha.php)

motivated ATM bombings that have taken place in the country in recent years - over 1,000 in 2008 alone. Illegal firearms are easily available to those with connections to the criminal underworld. The national South African Police Service alone 'loses' over 3,000 of its own firearms each year. It is difficult to see what would have prevented a determined attempt to carry out a Mumbai-style attack in South Africa during the month-long tournament.

And yet, when it came, the World Cup attack did not target one of South Africa's impressive new stadiums, nor a beachfront café crowded with some of the hundreds of thousands of Western tourists who streamed into the country for the sporting spectacle. Instead it took place thousands of miles away, at an Ethiopian restaurant and a rugby club in Uganda, and Western casualties, while tragic, were minimal. Why?

It is not because al-Shabaab does not have a presence in South Africa. In October 2009 South Africa's *Sunday Independent*, among the country's more respectable news sources, published details of a leaked report that South Africa's intelligence services had intercepted a call made by an al-Shabaab cell in Cape Town that made reference to a planned bombing attack on U.S. targets in the country. The report indicated that the Cape Town al-Shabaab cell was linked to a larger network based just across South Africa's poorly patrolled border with Mozambique. (For a well-researched – and alarming – account of the presence of terrorist networks in South Africa, see Hussein Solomon's paper 'Terrorism and Counterterrorism in South Africa', *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, Volume 1, Issue 1 2010, pages 108 – 119.)

One feasible explanation for why the World Cup attack took place in Uganda and not South Africa is that al-Qaeda's agenda failed to carry the day. The attack was directed at Uganda, hated by al-Shabaab for contributing the majority of the African Union troops that prop up its main local opponents, Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG). The attack was also directed at Ethiopia, also hated by al-Shabaab for its support of the TFG. The fact that the attack was directed against crowds watching the Soccer World Cup final seems to have been largely incidental, at best a half-hearted sop to al-Qaeda's need for a spectacular international-headline-grabbing event.

Of course this explanation needs to account for the statement by Isah Ahmed Luyima, the alleged 'mastermind' of the attacks, which he intended to cause significant casualties among U.S. citizens and so "targeted places where many Americans go."² Perhaps he's telling the truth, but if he is, it is at least a little surprising that the planner of a relatively sophisticated and well coordinated attack on multiple targets picked those targets so poorly. The Americans injured in the attack were members of a Pennsylvania church group visiting Uganda on a mission trip, while Nate Henn, the only U.S. fatality, seems also have been religiously motivated in his work for the aid group Invisible Children.³ In other words, these were people who were motivated to mingle with ordinary Ugandans outside of working hours, unlike the majority of those who make up the expat community in Kampala. Uganda receives a considerable amount of international aid money, and there are numerous international NGO's based in Kampala, with the consequence that the expat 'scene' is thriving. So why not target venues more obviously connected to the United States? The U.S. owned Kampala Sheraton, perhaps, or the symbolically tempting New

² Godfrey Olukya, August 12, 2010. 'Uganda suicide plot meant to kill more Americans' *Associated Press* (http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5hzHMeIMsFmUA1bDTDUdeL_hCMbjAD9HI2EB00).

³ See *Fox News*, July 12, 2010. 'Al Shabab Claims Responsibility for Uganda Blasts That Kill 74 World Cup Watchers'

York Kitchen restaurant in the Kampala's plush upscale Garden City Mall? If the choice of targets alone does not cast doubt on Luyima's statement, then the fact that al Qaeda seems not to believe it either must surely carry some weight. If al Qaeda bought the line that Americans were the intended target of the attacks, why would they suggest that 'Shabaab reserve future strikes at US interests in the region'?

There is little dispute that in recent months U.S. Special Forces and UAV attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan have decimated al-Qaeda's ranks and have significantly degraded their ability to coordinate and conduct high impact terrorist attacks. When a Salafist militia like al-Shabaab seemingly 'disses' their global partners by placing their own local agenda above the global cause, that may be a noteworthy sign of the waning influence of al-Qaeda.

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