SECURING THE NATION:
Responding to the Changing Terror Tactics after DusitD2 Attack

Background

On January 15, 2019, Somalia-based Islamic terror group al Shabab attacked DusitD2, a business complex in Nairobi that also houses a hotel, killing 21 people, and injuring many more.

The DusitD2 shares a compound with offices of international companies and is close to the Australian, Dutch and German embassies, creating a hub frequented by both Kenyans and nationals of other countries (foreigners).

The response by the security services to the terror attack was relatively swift, coordinated and effective. Minutes into the attack, the terrorists were put on the defense. This not only denied them the time and space with which to carry out mass killings, it also significantly reduced their ability to project terror and communicate to their command center in Somalia.

Information management out of the DusitD2 complex and relevant government agencies and the media was fairly well done, coordinated, and accurate, denying the terrorists a lifeline to project their terror.

The specialised units of the security services ended the siege in under 20 hours, having pushed back the terrorists within minutes, cornering them within hours.

Notable New Dynamics in DusitD2 Attack

1. Rented Terror

Earlier attacks by al Shabab in Kenya were mostly conducted by individuals from Somalia, or those recruited from counties in north-eastern and coastal regions of Kenya, with few exceptions. The DusitD2 attack however, was conducted by Kenyans mostly from other parts of the country, including Kiambu and Nyeri. This is a disturbing sign of the grave dangers of incorporation of Kenyan 'volunteers' into the al Shabab. Unlike foreigners, they can easily access any part of the country and any business premises without raising much suspicion.

2. Internationalization of al Shabab Agenda

There is a noteworthy change in the stated reason behind the attack. Hours after the first sounds of gunfire, al Shabab claimed that the attack was in retaliation to the United States embassy's move to Jerusalem. This indicates an attempt to internationalize al Shabab's agenda beyond its traditional Somalia (and regional) niche.

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If al Shabab succeeds in recasting its objectives more globally by focussing on the more globalized meta-narratives, it may regain some of the support it had lost internationally. Al Shabab, however, still remains a largely Somalia outfit.

3. Supremacy Wars

The above trend is an indication of wars of supremacy and protection of al Shabab's terror niches in Somalia following a gradual and fierce competition from newly established Islamic State in Somalia in the city of Mogadishu and in parts of Puntland. In conducting attacks that capture global attention, it is sending a signal to others of its supremacy and relevance in the region in terms of its ability to conduct attacks.

4. Suicide Missions

The use of suicide bombers is relatively new in Kenya, creating a need to adapt current measures to counter terrorism and violent extremism to this change. It is also a sign of desperation to cause more damage in the wake of declining recruits and manpower under its control.

5. Reduced Propaganda Space

Unlike the Westgate Mall attack, the terror group was denied opportunities to broadcast live feeds of their terrorist acts due to restraint and enhanced supervision of social media through closer collaboration between IT companies and governments. This is commendable. It denied them much sought-after publicity and infusion of mass fear in the local and global publics.

Below are recommendations on how the Kenya government and other actors can best deal with the changing dynamics of terrorism.

Recommendations and the Way Forward for:

Government, Media, CVE Actors and Civil Society Organizations

1) **Swift and Prompt Response**: In the event of a terrorist attack, respond quickly, provide solid information, manage information-flow, and employ adequate fear management techniques. Adopt the best response practices from Dusit D2 attacks and lessons learned from Westgate Mall attack.

2) **Structured Response**: Move civilians and first responders with firearms out of the area of operations as soon as specialized security services arrive at the scene.

3) **Sealing Loopholes:** Prevent corruption and fraud with identity documents and within border control agencies to stop smuggling of fireams, explosives, and individuals. At least two of the AK47s used in the DusitD2 attack belonged to the Somali National Army (SNA) and are believed to have been smuggled across the border. The United Nations warned, in 2018, that a batch of weapons provided to the SNA in mid-2017 was sold to arms dealers by unpaid soldiers, possibly finding their way into al Shabab hands.

4) **Social Media and Communication Management:** Devise a clear online strategy for people reaching out for help through social media platforms such as Twitter and WhatsApp. In the DusitD2 attack, a significant number of people reached out for help on Twitter and group WhatsApp, and some of them received fake or incorrect information in return. There should be well-known numbers that survivors can use to text their location, the situation on the ground, and the number of people they are with. (If terrorists follow such feeds in real time, it might be counterproductive). The numbers need to be easy to remember (like xxxx 700 000 or xxxx 999 999).

5) **Digital Disruptions**: Introduce 'hard-nosed' and more targeted digital disruption counter-measures to further deny, disrupt and interfere with the physical and cyber or virtual spaces used by terrorist groups and their sympathizers. In general, these campaigns should be expanded to cover the following areas of the country: Upper Eastern, Central, Western, and Rift Valley. Specifically, they should cover Majengo, (Nairobi); Majengo, (Nyeri); Majengo, Bondeni, Old Town, (Mombasa); Bulapessa, Tulloroba, Kulamawe and Merti (Isiolo); Tarbaj (Wajir); Takaba, El Wak (Mandera) and Alinjugur (Garissa).

6) **Hardened Critical Infrastructure Protection**: Provide strategically enhanced security for symbolic key infrastructure whose destruction or targeting might inspire at risk populations for recruitment. Furthermore, harden protection in public spaces and symbolic targets by equipping them with multiple entry layers, bulletproof doors, internal armed security units, and sufficient emergency exits.

7) Introduce targeted **Extreme Dialogue** in the at-risk communities vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment into violent extremism and terrorism. This should be introduced in the following locations: Majengo, (Nairobi); Majengo, (Nyeri); Majengo, Bondeni, Old Town, (Mombasa); Bulapessa, Tulloroba, Kulamawe and Merti (Isiolo); Tarbaj (Wajir); Takaba, El Wak (Mandera) and Alinjugur (Garissa).

8) **Expansion of Elite Forces' Area of Operation:** Deploy elite forces more effectively throughout the country. The swift response of the specialized elite forces in this scenario is commendable, but also largely because specialized and special elite forces are based in or near Nairobi and was thus close enough to the scene. In 2015, when the Garissa University attack unfolded, it took them almost 14 hours to arrive at the scene.

9) **Ideological 'Pushback':** Counter radicalization and recruitment by delegitimizing al Shabab's actions with religious texts and ideological pushback. Re-target, re-invigorate and re-energize the ideological push-back, prevent new and counter ongoing recruitment.

10) **Strengthen Policing Strategy:** Revise and deploy a community policing strategy and mechanisms aimed at strengthening ties and building trust between the security services and communities. Now, locals are often afraid of reporting suspicious activities to the police out of fear of arrest. Additionally, empower the *Nyumba Kumi* initiative more. Landlords and tenants should be sensitized on the need to be vigilant and share confidential information about new residents who appear suspicious and reclusive.

11) **Leverage Kenya's AMISOM Mission**: Urge AMISOM to venture into the hinterland where al Shabab still controls the population and territory, which it uses for training and equipping fighters. Recovered territories should be handed over to the Somali National Army for effective control and to win over local communities. Ali Salim Gichunge, the alleged mastermind of the DusitD2 attack, is reported to have received training in Somalia after crossing the border in 2015. AMISOM together with SNA and regional and international partners should work to completely root al Shabab out and stop them from regrouping and training in safe spaces.

12) **Strategy Review:** Review the National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism, taking note of new recruitment and radicalization trends, emergent routes of terrorist mobility and sleeper cells, and new opportunities to work more proactively with communities at risk.

13) **Comprehensive Nairobi Action Plan**: There is need for a comprehensive Nairobi County Action Plan for Countering Violent Extremism. Such a policy document should avoid prioritizing the usual spaces of radicalization and recruitment in poor neighbourhoods such as Kibera and Majengo, and include business communities, private security agencies and ordinary residents of Nairobi in more affluent neighbourhoods and the Central Business Districts which house international organizations, embassies, offices, hotels, religious places of worship, recreational spaces, key shopping malls, and residential estates.

14) **Surveillance and Information Sharing:** Key infrastructure should be offered more security and surveillance review. Owners of such premises should periodically share their CCTV footages with specialized security agencies for review to identify potential terror scouts and surveillance teams. This should be done confidentially and information obtained protected from third party access to protect clients from blackmail, extortion, risks to their businesses without infringing on their privacy and civil liberties. The owners should additionally share architectural designs for purposes of evacuation and prompt demobilization or elimination of terrorists in the event of attacks.

15) **Intelligence Sharing**: Greater intelligence and information sharing is necessary both between Kenya's regional and international partners and between various branches of security agencies to stop terrorist attacks dead in their tracks. Any potential leads offered by members of the general public must be treated with urgency it deserves and investigated.

16) **DDRR Programmes:** The Government should finalize and put in place a multi-sectorial strategy/programme on Disengagement, Deradicalization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration targeting those defecting from terrorist groups. Using its intelligence channels, relatives and friends of recruited terror fighters, the Government should entice defection from militant groups safely and receive such individuals with cautious optimism and guidance. These individuals should be protected from the terror group and upon completion of their programme, be reintegrated into society with economic incentives, educational opportunities and other benefits. This could potentially trigger further defection and weaken militant groups. Careful assessment of risks they pose to the State and to communities should be evaluated at the beginning of the programme and covert surveillance be put in place afterwards.

17) **Human Rights:** Adopt a humane and human rights-sensitive approach to counterterrorism operations. Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) often takes place in marginalized communities with already disenfranchised individuals and groups. Arbitrary arrests, police harassment and brutality, disappearances, and other human rights violations are counterproductive as they alienate the subject population from the security services and the rest of the country.