



Al Shabaab and the 9\11 style terror plot

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Nearly 20 years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the U.S. and Philippine security forces foiled a 9\11 style terror attack against United States. The Philippine security forces have arrested Cholo Abdi Abdullah, a Kenyan member of Al Shabaab, in Iba, Zambales in Philippines, on July 1, 2019 on local charges. Abdullah was transferred on December 15, 2020, to U.S. custody on charges that he conspired to hijack an aircraft and crash it into a tall building in the U.S.¹

On January 5, 2021, Al-Shabaab's leader, Abu Ubaydah urged his followers to step up attacks against American and Israeli targets and also called for attacks on France for its “crimes” against the honor of the prophet Muhammad. Abu Ubaydah marked the anniversary of the terrorist group’s attack on Camp Simba in Kenya, claiming it was revenge for alleged U.S. crimes against the Muslims of Somalia. He added that it was also part of a series of attacks under the slogan, “Jerusalem will never be Judaized ”, launched by Al-Qaeda in response to the Trump administration's decision to move the U.S. embassy in Israel to the city of Jerusalem.² Cholo Abdi Abdullah's plot was allegedly part of the operation "Jerusalem will never be Judaized," which was launched in 2019.

Acting Manhattan U.S. Attorney Audrey Strauss said:" Thanks to the outstanding investigative work of the New York Joint Terrorism Task Force, and the FBI’s global partnerships with law enforcement agencies around the world, Abdullah’s plot was detected before he could achieve his deadly aspirations, and now he faces federal terrorism charges in a U.S. court.”³

Abdullah's terror plot

Cholo Abdi Abdullah, 30 years old Kenyan pledged allegiance to Al Shabaab and the Al Qaeda groups since 2012. Al Shabaab has been recruiting Kenyans and other East Africans in a bid to launch more attacks beyond Somali borders.

He was acting in Philippines under the direction of a senior Al Shabaab commander who planned a deadly 2019 attack on a hotel in Nairobi, Kenya.

The aviation school in Philippines

Abdullah began the process of enrolling in the flight school All-Asia Aviation Academy in the Philippines in 2016.He received training and ultimately completed the tests necessary to obtain his pilot’s license.⁴

Before his arrest, Abdullah had been making preparations in the Philippines to hijack an airplane and crash it into a building in the United States. He researched methods of hijacking a commercial

¹ Suspected al Qaeda member arrested, Rappler.com, July 2, 2019.

² Al-Shabaab terror group calls to attack Israeli, American, French targets, JNS, January 5, 2021.

³ The US Attorney's office Southern district of New York, December 16, 2020.

⁴ FBI accuses man of al-Shabab-led '9/11-style' plot, BBC News, 16 December 2020.

airliner, such as how to breach a cockpit door from the outside. In addition, Abdullah did research about the tallest building in a major U.S. city and sought information about how to obtain an American visa.⁵

Abdullah is the second Al Shabaab operative to have been arrested while taking flying lessons in the last two years. Another was arrested more recently in an African country.⁶

The arrest in Philippines

Cholo Abdi Abdullah, was arrested in Iba, Zambales in Philippines, on July 1, 2019, for possessing illegal firearms and explosives. Operatives from the Philippine National Police (PNP) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines nabbed Abdullah at the Rasaca Hotel and confiscated a 9-mm pistol, ammunition, a homemade bomb (improvised explosive device - IED), a hand grenade, and components used in making bombs.⁷

The Harakat Al-Shabaab Al Mujahideen

The Harakat Al-Shabaab Al Mujahideen, or Al-Shabaab, (Movement of Warrior Youth), is an offshoot of the former Islamic Courts Union (ICU) of Somalia and the branch of Al Qaeda in the Horn of Africa. Al-Shabaab seeks to overthrow the government in Somalia and to establish an Islamic emirate ruled by a strict version of Shariah law.⁸

Over the past decades, the western-backed Somali government has relied on the support of African Union forces (AMISOM) to battle the Al Shabaab. The US military estimates that al-Shabaab commands somewhere between 5,000 to 7,000 fighters.⁹ After being pushed out of their main bastions by AMISOM in 2011, Al-Shabaab still controls swaths of territory outside the cities. The group is essentially a governing force that provides effective - if brutal - judicial services, which are as popular with those living outside the areas it controls as those inside them. It imposes fines and taxes, even in government-controlled areas.

Al Shabaab has continued to wage war against the government, with regular attacks in Mogadishu and against neighboring countries (mainly Kenya) which have contributed to the AMISOM force.¹⁰

⁵ Suspected al Qaeda member arrested.

⁶ Kenyan Planned 9/11-Style Attack After Training as Pilot, U.S. Says, The New York Times, December 16, 2020.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Somalia: Governor killed in suicide bombing claimed by al-Shabaab, Al Jazeera, May 17, 2020.

⁹ Most analysts put the number of al-Shabaab fighters somewhere just short of 10,000, although the true number is hard to discern, as many of the group's members blend into civilian life.

¹⁰ Somalia army chief survives suicide bombing in Mogadishu, Al Jazeera, July 13, 2020.

Al-Shabaab opposes the presence of foreign troops and regularly attacks foreign interests and peacekeepers in the region including American, EU and Turkish targets.

Al Shabaab is likely to remain so until the Somali government and its allies form a credible, functioning alternative.¹¹

The Philippines as a launching pad for terror attacks

In the past, the Philippines had been a launching pad for deadly attacks. Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, the Al-Qaeda mastermind of the September 11, 2001 attacks, had lived in Manila in the 1990s, alongside his nephew Ramzi Yousef, who is serving life in prison in U.S. for the World Trade Center bombing in 1993.¹²

Project Bojinka¹³ - was Yousef's most elaborate and ambitious scheme. He planned to blow up 11 U.S. airliners almost simultaneously over the Pacific Ocean, using small but strategically placed bombs. In order to test the bomb Yousef boarded Philippines Airlines flight 434 in Manila. Once on board, he assembled a bomb in the bathroom and placed it under his seat. Yousef disembarked in Cebu, and the bomb exploded while the plane was en route to Tokyo, killing one passenger and injuring several others. Abu Sayyaf claimed responsibility for the bombing, while Yousef continued to fine-tune his plot.

On January 6, 1995, while mixing chemicals intended for bombs, Yousef and an associate started a small fire in their room. When police arrived, both men had already fled, leaving behind bomb-making materials and Yousef's laptop. The laptop provided authorities with information related to the planned attacks in a file named "Bojinka," which detailed how five men were to plant bombs on 11 American planes in the Far East. The first scheduled bombing was January 21, 1995, just weeks away.

After fleeing, Yousef arrived to Pakistan and on February 7, 1995, Pakistani authorities captured Yousef in his hotel room. He was flown to the United States after his arrest to await trial for the World Trade Center bombing and the Bojinka plot. In November 1997 he was found guilty of the World Trade Center bombing and sentenced of life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Operation "Jerusalem Will Never be Judaized"

In January 2019 Al-Qaeda launched a campaign called "Jerusalem will never be Judaized" in response to the Trump administration's decision to move the U.S. embassy in Israel to the city of

¹¹ Mary Harper, US Somali operation shrouded in secrecy, BBC, September 30, 2019.

¹² Kenyan nabbed in the Philippines plotting '9/11-style hijacking', Al Jazeera, December 16, 2020.

¹³ Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, Britannica.

Jerusalem.¹⁴ Under campaign “Jerusalem will never be Judaized” the group's affiliates in East and West Africa have carried out high profile terror attacks in respective regions and beyond. Abdullah's plot was allegedly part of the terror campaign.¹⁵

On December 5, 2019, U.S. Africa Command and Kenya Defense forces (KDF) repelled an attack on Manda Airstrip near the Camp Simba U.S. base in Lamu county, near Kenya's border with Somalia. A U.S. service member and two civilian contractors working for the Department of Defense were killed and two other U.S. Department of Defense personnel were wounded in the attack. Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the attack and Kenya's military said it killed at least four terrorists in repelling the attack. Al-Shabaab said that the attack was "part of Harakat Al-Shabaab Al Mujahideen's - Jerusalem will never be Judaized' military operation".

On September 30, 2019, Al Shabaab launched two attacks on U.S and European military targets in Somalia. The first attack was on the Belidogle military airstrip which is a base for U.S. and Somalia forces in the Lower Shabelle region in southern Somalia. A suicide car bomber detonated a vehicle packed with explosives at the gate of the Belidogle airstrip. The U.S. military uses the Belidogle airstrip base to launch drones that attack Al-Shabab targets and to train Somali troops.

The second attack was by a suicide car bomber targeting Italian peacekeepers in Mogadishu. The explosion missed a convoy of the European Union peacekeepers but injured Somali civilians who were nearby.

On January 16, 2019, Al-Shabaab attacked the Dusit D2 hotel in Nairobi killing 14 civilians, including one American. In its statement claiming responsibility for the attack, Al-Shabaab said it was in response to U.S. President Donald Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. “Even if the Zionists and crusaders were to move all the embassies in the world to Jerusalem, the sacred land shall forever remain a noble Muslim sanctuary, without concession or compromise. Jerusalem will never be Judaized,” the statement said.¹⁶

Summary

Al-Shabaab has been on the offensive since 2019 and increased its attacks on African Union (AMISOM) bases, Somali government facilities and officials and security forces, US and EU forces and targets in neighboring Kenya and Ethiopia.

Al-Shabaab group poses a serious threat not only to Somalia’s security but also to that of the African continent and the globe at large. It adheres to the same global Islamist ideology as Al-Qaeda and

¹⁴ FBI accuses man of al-Shabab-led '9/11-style' plot, bbc News, December 17, 2020.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Fatiha Belfakir, Experts: Kenyan Attack Sign of Al-Shabab Resilience, VOA, January 16, 2019.

has made several public statements pledging allegiance to the group and praising its leaders. The group has issued several threats to strike outside Africa, including American and European targets.

17

The indictment of Cholo Abdi Abdullah was the latest reminder that Al Qaeda and its affiliates remain a threat to America nearly two decades after terrorists brought down the World trade center in Manhattan and hit the Pentagon with commercial aircrafts.

The US military's Africa Command head, Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the US military's air campaign against Al-Shabaab in Somalia will not stop the jihadists and at the end of the day, these air strikes are not going to defeat al-Shabaab." The bottom line is that the Somalian national army needs to grow, it needs to step up and it needs to take responsibility for their own security, he added.¹⁸

President Trump has ordered in December 2020 to pull out most of the 700 U.S. troops in Somalia by early 2021. American officials and military commanders and Somali officials have expressed concern that an abrupt U.S. withdrawal could destabilize security in Somalia as the country heads into elections in 2021, handing the Al Shabaab tactical and propaganda victories.¹⁹

¹⁷ Audu Bulama Bukarti, The Somalia Attack and the Ineffective Approach to al-Shabaab, Institute for global change, October 18, 2017.

¹⁸ US General: Strikes in Somalia Won't Stop Al-Shabaab, VOA, February 07, 2019.

¹⁹ Ibid.

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