How do leadership decapitation and targeting error affect suicide bombings? The case of Al-Shabaab

Mohammed Ibrahim Shire

Institute of Criminal Justice Studies, University of Portsmouth, Hampshire, United Kingdom

Email: warsame101@gmail.com

Address: Institute of Criminal Justice Studies, St George’s Building, 141 High Street, Portsmouth PO1 2HY, UK
How do leadership decapitation and targeting error affect suicide bombings? The case of Al-Shabaab

Abstract

Targeted killing is a cornerstone of counter-terrorism strategy, and tactical mistakes made by militant groups are endemic in terrorism. Yet, how do they affect a militant group's suicide bomber deployment? Since joining Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab has carried out various types of suicide attacks on different targets. Using a uniquely constructed dataset, I introduce two typologies of suicide bomber detonation profiles – single and multiple – and explore the strategic purposes these have served for the group during multiphasic stages following targeted killings against the group's leadership and targeting errors committed by Al-Shabaab. The findings reveal that targeted killing has the opposite effect of disrupting suicide attacks, instead, leading to a rapid proliferation of unsophisticated single suicide attacks against civilian and military targets to maintain the perception of the group's potency. Thus, I argue that targeting errors made by Al-Shabaab have a more serious detrimental effect on its deployment of suicide attacks than any counter-terrorism measure.
Introduction

On 5 September 2014, the U.S. government officially confirmed that the death of Ahmed Abdi Godane, leader and co-founder of Al-Shabaab – a Somali militant group allied to Al-Qaeda – was the result of targeted killing via air strike. The White House stated that the "successful" counter-terrorism operation marked a "major symbolic and operational loss to Al-Qaeda's largest affiliate in Africa". Some analysts predicted that the killing of Al-Shabaab's powerful leader would put pressure on the group, leading to disarray, and set in motion the eventual collapse of one of Africa's deadliest terrorist groups. Indeed, one analyst concluded that, "his death would result in an increasing number of defectors and bring the inevitable break-up of the group". However, just three years later, in October 2017, Al-Shabaab was responsible for Somalia's deadliest terrorist attack, when a truck bomb detonated at a busy intersection (Zoobe intersection), killing 587 people and injuring 316 others. The attack, perceived by investigators to be a targeting error, sparked widespread public outrage and condemnation (even among members of the group) and to date, Al-Shabaab has neither claimed nor denied responsibility for the incident arguably due to the associated political risk of provoking a strong adverse public reaction.

State-sponsored targeted killing is not a new phenomenon. A particular type of targeted killing known as leadership decapitation has been operationalized globally, and is based on the notion that successfully eliminating a leader can defeat or force militant organizations into disarray. Similar to major terrorist incidents, the intended purpose of leadership decapitation is to bring about an immediate impact. The targeted killing of high-ranking and influential militant leaders may have an enduring impact in the form of escalating conflict or disrupting a group's organizational routine and triggering and hastening complete collapse. However, there is no consensus regarding whether it is a useful instrument of counter-terrorism. The scholarly disharmony in extant literature can be partly
explained by the assorted data, metrics, and methodologies cited in discussions of what constitutes a successful counter-terrorism operation. This ranges from analyzing how it affects a group's longevity and durability, to their rate of attacks, lethality, or even propaganda output.10

A further complicating factor is that targeting errors have been committed by both state and non-state actors. Militant groups generally fight for a constituency (real or imagined) and, in return, seek and need its support for long-term survival.11 In the context of this article, a targeting error is defined as a tactical miscalculation made by a militant group that can cause revulsion among its existing or envisaged public constituency.12 Often, these are targets that the public would consider illegitimate (i.e., civilian spaces), and thus such errors can have a detrimental effect on the group's public support and perceived legitimacy. Suicide attacks in populated civilian targets spaces often invite strong public backlash.13

However, suicide attacks are the most dramatic way to illustrate the problems of counter-terrorism operations. Immediate mass-casualty attacks send a message that militants are defiant and able to strike back with a vengeance.14 Once dubbed as Africa's deadliest terrorist group by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), there is surprisingly limited existing empirical work that examines Al-Shabaab's suicide operations and remains seriously under-researched.15 To date, no study has addressed how leadership decapitation and targeted killing errors can impact a group's tactical choices (e.g., the rate of suicide attacks and target selection in deploying different types of suicide operation). To fill the lacuna in the literature, this article adopts an empirical strategy by analyzing Al-Shabaab's deployment of suicide attacks based on whether a targeted killing attempt against the group's leadership was an operational success (as in the case of Godane) or the group made a targeting error that led to mass civilian casualties (as in the case of the Zoobe intersection incident). It is often theorized that when militant leaders are eliminated in a successful strike,
insurgent groups become far less discriminate in their target selection, redirecting their violence from military to civilian targets. In this study, I examine the impact leadership decapitations and targeting errors have had on Al-Shabaab's tactical choices in regard to deploying suicide attacks. More acutely, I investigate how the targeted killing of Al-Shabaab's leader, Godane, and the group's targeting error that resulted in Africa's deadliest bombing, altered the group's suicide operations. In doing so, this article situates the group's suicide operations within three distinctive and sequential phases: before the targeted killing (August 2011 to August 2014); after the targeted killing (September 2014 – September 2017); and after the targeting error (October 2017 – December 2019).

The article begins with brief background information about Al-Shabaab and with a deliberate focus on the group's most influential leader, Ahmed Abdi Godane. Immediately following this is a discussion of leadership decapitation and targeting errors in theory and in practice. Here I will delineate the scope of the study and clearly specify its assumptions and key concepts by introducing past empirical studies on targeted killings and targeting errors, and make empirical predictions related to the effects of both leadership decapitation and targeting errors in relation to Al-Shabaab's suicide operations. I then introduce a constructed dataset that chronicles the group's territorial losses and subsequent formal adoption of suicide operations (from 2011 to 2019). Building on this dataset, I define and delineate two detonation typologies observed in the Al-Shabaab data: single and multiple detonations. The following sections will present the results and discuss the key findings of the study. I conclude the paper by outlining the implications of these findings for both academic and policy audiences.

**A brief history of Al-Shabaab and emir Ahmed Abdi Godane**

Somalia's recent history since the collapse of President Siad Barre's government in 1991 is mired with anarchy, inept and venal governments, foreign interferences and endemic
insecurity. This conflict landscape has fostered a fluid environment in which warlords and various forms of extremist groups flourished. Al-Shabaab was formed initially from the remnants of Al-Itihaad al-Islamiyya (AIAI), a militant Islamist group which surfaced following the onset of Somalia’s civil war, capturing strategic locations and establishing control and enacting strict measures that brought some semblance of civil security to previously lawless areas. In 1996, Ethiopia invaded Somalia and defeated AIAI, but in the aftermath, events birthed a number of loosely affiliated and clan-orientated Islamic courts in the capital city of Somalia, Mogadishu. Their mission rested on a core message to restore some semblance of security and peace in a country rife with internecine clan conflicts. By 2004, the assorted clan-based courts merged to form the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). The ICU enforced strict edicts reminiscent of the Taliban and consequently succeeded in bringing an unprecedented degree of peace and security not seen in Mogadishu since 1991. Within the ICU, a radical youth wing called Al-Shabaab was formed, led by battle-hardened and Taliban-trained commanders. One of them was Ahmed Abdi Godane, who was to become one of Al-Shabaab’s most influential leaders and equally one the most wanted figures in Africa.

1 Ahmed Abdi Godane, also known as also known as Mukhtar Abu Zubair, was born on 10 July 1977 in Somaliland, a self-declared sovereign state in northern Somalia. Belonging to the Arab/Isaaq clan family, he had a strong penchant for reading and reciting poetry. Educated in Sudan and Pakistan on Saudi-funded scholarships, he developed affinity for militant Islamism in Pakistan. From Pakistan, Godane regularly traveled to Afghanistan during school breaks, where he fought alongside the Afghan Taliban, gaining valuable training and battlefield experience before ultimately returning to Somalia in 2001. For a more elaborate account, see Anzalone, “The Life and Death of Al-Shabab Leader Ahmed Godane”.

6
Godane initially served as the secretary-general of ICU's executive council. During this period Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed—who later went on to become the president of Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in 2009—was serving in the top leadership of the ICU. After the Ethiopian invasion toppled the ICU from power in late 2006, Godane became one of the principal architects that reorganized and rebranded Al-Shabaab into a formidable Somali nationalist group and spearheaded a deadly insurgency against the Ethiopian occupation forces.

After being crowned as Al-Shabaab's leader in late 2007, he began to increasingly disapprove of Somalis' primordial clan system and Sufi traditions and instead placed a greater emphasis on the takfiri ideology, previously espoused by a number of transnational violent extremist organizations. This latter development occurred during Ethiopian troops' gradual exit from Somalia, and public support for Al-Shabaab was waning. Once Ethiopian troops completely withdrew in January 2009, the group enjoyed minimal support from Somalia's Sufi majority who resented the imposition of the takfiri doctrine on their daily lives.

Dwindling local support and a resurgent clan loyalty among the group's rank and file increased the need for foreign fighters. Godane shrewdly realised that in order to increase foreign recruits, he needed to reconstruct the conflict in Somalia and situate it beyond the local level. This was made clear in the global jihad intentions he proclaimed, where he directly mentioned Al-Shabaab as an integral part of global jihad, and declaring personal

---

2 The term takfiri is used by several violent extremist groups that see Islam through a narrow keyhole of self-righteousness and consider other Muslims or certain groups of Muslims as apostate. They use the term against those who may not agree with their ideology or refrain from pledging allegiance to them.
allegiance to bin Laden and other Al-Qaeda operatives 25, before formally stating the group’s allegiance to bin Laden in August 2008. With his preference for global jihad and attracting international fighters, Godane paid scant attention in maintaining national support.

Al-Shabaab officially merged with Al-Qaeda in February 2012. However, the merger invited strong resistance from the militant group’s core members, and exacerbated the internal fissures within Al-Shabaab.26 Operationally, the merger proved inconsequential; however, it served to strengthen the global jihadist faction within Al-Shabaab and solidified significant ideological ties. Already, Godane was vehemently accused by his critics for exhibiting a brutal and un-Islamic style of leadership. In June 2013, the emir responded to his opponents by purging several dissenting leaders within the group. First, Godane loyalists killed Ibrahim al-Afghani and Ma'alin Burhan in a shootout after the two resisted arrest.27 In September, pro-Godane assassins tracked down and killed Omar Hammami and a group of foreign fighters.28 Isolated Al-Shabaab leaders, Mukhtar Robow and Hassan Dahir Aweys, were forced to flee in order to escape the violent purge. Concluding the crackdown on internal dissidents, Godane's consolidation of power within Al-Shabaab was finalised. Until his death in 2014, the militant group continued to execute coordinated attacks within and beyond Somalia.

Leadership decapitation and targeting errors

Efficacy of leadership decapitation

There is a lack of scholarly consensus regarding the efficacy of leadership decapitation against militant groups. On the one hand, some scholars argue that leadership decapitation, under the right conditions, can be an effective tactic against terrorist groups.29 Through measuring the lifespan of militant groups, Price30 examined the effectiveness of leadership decapitation by assessing its long-term impacts; the findings suggested that decapitation
strategies may lead to a short-term increase in violence, but can reduce terrorist attacks in the long term. Moreover, hierarchical militant groups are particularly susceptible to leadership decapitation due to their unique organizational characteristics, which often make leadership succession complicated. According to Johnston, the elimination of leaders not only limits the operational capabilities of militant groups with fewer resources, time and expertise to execute lethal attacks but also pushes them to adopt a defensive mode. Targeted killing is also associated with deterrent effects. Advocates of this tactic argue that leadership targeting hinders militant organizations from attacking the state and instead encourages them to negotiate.

By contrast, decapitation is considered by some critics to be ineffective and counterproductive. For instance, it is argued that recruiting, radicalization, and retaliatory attacks can be increased as a result of leadership elimination. Furthermore, when a top-level or influential militant leader is killed, it may create a martyrdom effect and increase support for the cause and the legitimacy of a movement. After studying Israel's targeted killing policy, Byman found that the practice promoted retaliatory responses and increased the number of attacks, although it reduced the mortality of attacks. Citing the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism's (MIPT), Byman underlines that while 185 Israelis were killed in 2002, these numbers decreased to 45 in 2003, 67 in 2004 and 21 in 2005. Based on these statistics, Byman argues that although the number of attacks by Hamas actually rose (from 19 in 2001, 34 in 2002, 46 in 2003, 202 in 2004 and 179 in 2005), the lethality decreased considerably, thus rendering it less effective. According to Cohen and Hosmer, leadership targeting operations have prevented or hampered terrorist attacks to an extent, but only a marginal deterrent value can be traced to those targeted at individual leaders; they further argue that terrorist actions may even become more ferocious after the quick replacement of assassinated leaders.
There is a growing scholarly discord regarding the efficacy of leadership decapitation. Thus, the empirical predictions made in this article are in line with the school of scholarly literature that argues that leadership decapitations will inevitably invite increased violence. Consequently, I expect the data to show a significant sharp increase in单 suicide attacks against civilian targets following a targeted killing.

**Targeting errors and backlash**

A militant group's ability to maintain organizational strength and capacity is mostly dependent on active public support and sympathy. One of the primary reasons why such popular support can be lost is tactical miscalculations and targeting errors, especially when there is a significant backlash from the group's constituency.\(^3^9\) Indeed, the literature on terrorism emphasizes the significance that non-combatants’ deaths have in conflicts \(^4^0\).

Indiscriminate violence against civilians can progressively erode public sympathy and is counterproductive for grassroots public support.\(^4^1\) Among the many examples of targeting errors that prompted considerable public backlash is the aftermath of the Luxor Massacre, where 62 people were massacred by an Egyptian militant group, Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya (GAI) on 17 November 1997. The majority of the victims were tourists, including a five-year-old British child and four young Japanese couples. The incident turned popular opinion overwhelmingly against the group, which lost the legitimacy, the means, and the capacity to carry out further attacks.\(^4^2\) Similar examples of groups losing popular support following targeting errors include the Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA), Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP-GC), Front de liberation du Quebec (FLQ), Sikh Separatists, Chechen Separatists, Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), Armenian Secret Army for the
Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), and the Red Brigades. The public backlash either destroyed these groups outright, or served to legitimize the more aggressive methods used successfully by the state. Indeed, Al-Shabaab is cognizant of this as it largely avoids indiscriminately suicide bombing civilians and civilian spaces. The militant group adopted this discriminative approach following Al-Qaeda's criticism of the group's intentional targeting of civilians.

Yet, targeting errors have not escaped Al-Shabaab, and the group has refused to claim responsibility for a number of suicide operations that sparked considerable public outrage (e.g., the 2009 Hotel Shamo attack, and the 2017 attack on Kawa-Godey market). However, the Zoobe suicide attack stands in stark contrast with earlier targeting errors in terms of the scale of the loss of life (virtually all civilians), the magnitude of the explosion and the resultant public outrage. Close to 600 people died on 14 October 2017 when a vehicle carrying an estimated two tonnes of homemade explosives detonated during rush hour at Zoobe junction, a busy thoroughfare in Mogadishu. The intended target of the suicide attack

3 Specific example attacks are the 1998 Omagh bombings by the RIRA in Northern Ireland that sparked a public fury because of the high civilian casualties. Even though the RIRA clarified that they did not intend to kill civilians, the group never recovered. Equally, the murder of popular former prime minister Aldo Moro by Red Brigades caused a public outrage among the Italian population and led to the loss of popular support. See Cronin (2009) for more example of attacks committed by similar groups.

4 On December 3, 2009, an Al-Shabaab suicide bomber attacked the graduation ceremony of Mogadishu's Banadir University, killing 25 people, including government ministers, doctors and students. Equally, on February 19, 2017, a truck loaded with explosives parked near a restaurant in Kawa-Godey market of Mogadishu’s Wadajir district, went off killing over 30 people including a family of twelve members leaving behind injuries of more than 60 people.
was believed to be the airport compound where the United Nations, several foreign embassies, and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) were based. However, the vehicle was stopped at the checkpoint by security and, before it could be searched, the driver accelerated, crashing through a barrier before detonating the explosives next to a fuel tanker. The next day, thousands of civilians marched in the capital city, wearing pieces of red cloth around their foreheads to symbolize unity and solidarity with those killed and injured in the bombing. The Zoobe bombing, in terms of casualties, has been cemented as one of the world’s deadliest acts of terrorism since 9/11. In a country recovering from a destructive civil war, the Zoobe incident was considered the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. Reflecting the level of public outrage, large crowds chanted anti-Al-Shabaab slogans. Many rank-and-file Al-Shabaab fighters defected in protest against the bombing.

Mukhtar Robow, a former Al-Shabaab deputy leader and one of the founding members of the militant group, vehemently condemned the attack.

For the purposes of this article, an important and pertinent inquiry is how targeting miscalculations affect suicide operations such as the Zoobe attack. I expect the data to show a significant reduction in single and multiple suicide attacks following this targeting error.

Methods

Compiling the Dataset
The author constructed a unique dataset of Al-Shabaab suicide bombings, employing a range of data collection techniques. The dataset includes 176 incidents from August 2011 until the end of December 2019. The events can be grouped into three timeframes, which will be used to analyze the data. The first period is between August 2011 and August 2014. This marks the time when Al-Shabaab lost significant territorial ground, such as Mogadishu, Baidoa, and Afgoye, and later on Merca and Kismayo. Following their withdrawal from these areas, the
group increasingly adopted suicide attacks. This period is referred to as 'Before the targeted killing'. The second period is between September 2014 and September 2017, the period when Al-Shabaab's leader Godane was killed in a U.S. drone attack; this is subsequently referred to as 'After the targeted killing'. The final period is between October 2017 and December 2019, a period which began with the infamous Zoobe bombing which occurred in October 2017. This period is referred to as the 'After the targeting error'.

Those suicide attacks that Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for, or those where at least two sources assign responsibility to the group, were included in the dataset. Careful and objective consideration was given to the sources that identified the group’s involvement in attacks. Each suicide attack incident included information on the country and city/town/village of incident, the number of civilian and non-civilian fatalities and injuries, target type, hard or soft target, type of improvised explosive device (IED), the number of perpetrators, gender, and instances of non-detonation or prevention of suicide attacks, among others. The dataset framework of Global Terrorism Database (GTD) was initially adopted to create the dataset. However, the author noted that the database did not include the year 2019, as well as other key variables required for the study. The author resolved this problem by adding the missing year 2019. Data from Factiva, which contains online newspaper stories, was collected using the search string "bombing OR bomb AND Al-Shabaab OR Al-Shabab OR Somalia", and filled the missing year (2019) with data obtained from news reports. The reliability of the data was maximized through an iterative approach, where the data was thoroughly cross-referenced and validated with news sources in Somali and English languages for the period between August 2011 and December 2019. The author accurately plotted up to date casualty figures by analyzing news articles when a suicide attack was reported and 15 days after the attack. A comprehensive database, consisting of 20 variables relating to each suicide bombing within the specified periods, was then created using the
available information. As a caveat, the actual number of deaths may be higher than the figure contained in the data. Using the constructed dataset, the author subsequently constructed two detonation profiles for Al-Shabaab, labeled single and multiple detonations which are described in the next section.

**Detonation coding**

*Single detonations*

The first type of tactical detonation for suicide attacks I identify is the “single” profile. In this case, a single bomber carrying an explosive belt and/or a suicide car bomb, enters a town, city, or municipality and detonates the belt and/or car bomb at a designated place and time. One example of a single bomber detonating a suicide belt occurred on 14 December 2017 in Mogadishu, Somalia, when an Al-Shabaab operative disguised as a police officer walked into a police academy and detonated an explosive vest, killing 18 people and wounding 15.50 Another example occurred on 10 September 2018 in Mogadishu where a suicide car bomb was detonated at the gate of a district headquarters, killing six people and injuring 16 others. 51

Single detonations are increasingly being deployed against security barriers to provide unobstructed passage for teams of gunmen to raid the actual target. One example of such an attack occurred on 26 June 2015, when a suicide bomber drove a car loaded with explosives into the entrance of an AMISOM military base in Leego; a number of assailants armed with machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades then entered the base, killing 54 AMISOM soldiers and wounding 27.52

*Multiple detonations*

The second type of suicide bombing tactical detonation I identify is the "multiple” profile. Multiple suicide attacks primarily differ from single suicide attacks in terms of the number of suicide bombers deployed. Whereas a single suicide attack involves a single
suicide bomber, a multiple suicide attack incorporates two or more suicide bombers. In this type of operation, multiple suicide bombers utilize either a car bomb or an explosive belt, or both; Bomber 1 and Bomber 2 (or more) enter a town, city, or municipality together. At a scheduled time, both (or all) bombers detonate their explosives simultaneously. Alternatively, detonation can be sequential, where Bomber 1 detonates his/her explosives and, once a throng has gathered, or as bystanders and emergency responders congregate, Bomber 2 will join the same space and blow up his/her explosive-packed belt or car bomb, creating a surge of destruction. One example of a multiple suicide attack occurred on 21 August 2016, in Galkayo, Somalia: a suicide bomber drove a car bomb into a local government compound housing administrative officials; soon after the first responders exited the surrounding buildings, another suicide bomber detonated a speeding car bomb in the target area, killing 27 civilians and soldiers and wounding 43.53

Notably, multiple detonations are occasionally deployed in sophisticated and coordinated attacks, wherein a Bomber 1 and Bomber 2 (or more) approach a heavily fortified area. Bomber 1 detonates his/her explosives against a security perimeter making way for gunmen and other suicide bombers to enter the premises. Bomber 2 then detonates his/her explosives inside the breached premises to inflict maximum damage. One example of this type of multiple suicide operation occurred on April 15, 2013, in Mogadishu, when a suicide bomber detonated a car bomb at the gate outside law courts in Mogadishu, and subsequently, seven Al-Shabaab gunmen stormed the compound, several strapped with explosive belts, and three further bombs were detonated inside the compound killing 29 people and injuring 58.54

Results

Periods

To contextualize the primary analysis, the number of single and multiple suicide attacks
carried out by Al-Shabaab before and after the killing of Godane were examined. Figure 1 displays the number of attacks carried out each month by Al-Shabaab between August 2011 and December 2019. Three solid vertical lines marking three distinctive periods are illustrated: the period before the targeted killing of Godane (August 2011 to August 2014); the period after the targeted killing of Godane (September 2014 to September 2017); and the period after the targeting error that led to the Zoobe incident (October 2017 to December 2019). The first two phases are equal in length (37 months each), while the final period is 27 months.

The first period (August 2011 to August 2014) marks a critical juncture in Al-Shabaab's insurgency. After suffering several defeats at the hands of AMISOM and TFG forces, the group was evicted from a number of key cities, including the capital Mogadishu, Afgoye, and Baidoa. Outgunned and outnumbered by AMISOM and the TFG forces, the group acknowledged the asymmetric realities of the conflict and subsequently abandoned their conventional mass frontline attacks and shifted to guerrilla tactics involving IEDs, ambushes, and suicide bombing. Their increased use of suicide bombing came as a result of their incorporation into al-Qaeda in February 2012.55

The second period (September 2014 to September 2017) signifies the targeted killing of Al-Shabaab's leader. At the start of September 2014, a U.S. drone strike in southern Somalia killed Ahmed Abdi Godane, the ideological emir of al-Shabaab, and the group's leadership was unanimously handed over to Ahmad Umar, also known as Abu Ubaidah, just five days after Godane's death. Even though leadership decapitation did not lead to the group's collapse, this period highlights the impact of the targeted killing and Al-Shabaab's subsequent response in utilizing single and multiple suicide operations.

Lastly, the third period (October 2017 to December 2019) marks the aftermath of Somalia's deadliest attack since Al-Shabaab began its insurgency in early 2007.
Disaggregating the suicide attacks

Before the targeted killing

The data reveals that the number of suicide operations carried out before the targeted killing of Godane averaged around one single suicide bombing every month and one attack every two months for multiple suicide operations. During this period, the deployment of sophisticated and coordinated operations (multiple suicide attacks) was relatively consistent and regular, as shown in Figure 1, indicating a bi-monthly deployment.

Al-Shabaab deployed 81 suicide bombers during the time before the targeted killing, with 38 single suicide bombers and 43 suicide bombers participating in multiple suicide operations (see Figure 2). According to Figure 2, the use of suicide bombers in multiple suicide operations started gaining pace and dominated tactics for the majority of 2013 until the targeted killing of the group's leader.

The total deaths resulting from the 32 successful single attacks carried out during this period were 311 combatants and civilians; for the 14 successful multiple suicide operations, the number of deaths totaled 112 combatants and civilians.

During this phase (see Table 1), targeting patterns reveal that Somali federal government institutions and personnel accounted for the majority of single suicide attacks, while the majority of multiple suicide operations were carried out at sites primarily patronized by civilians (local markets, restaurants, and hotels).
After the targeted killing

If the targeted killing of their leader deterred Al-Shabaab, then one would expect the dotted line signifying the number of their attacks after this event to drop below the solid line that indicates their previous attacks. However, this was not the case following the leadership decapitation of Al-Shabaab.

In the period after the killing, the group almost doubled the number of suicide bombers participating in single suicide attacks, an increase of 84.20% compared to the period before the killing (see Figure 3). For the multiple suicide operations, there was a slight uptick in the rate of suicide attacks, compared to the period before the killing. However, there was an immediate drop in the use of multiple suicide bombers in coordinated attacks, while greater priority was assigned to the deployment of single suicide bombers. It was only in 2016 that the group increasingly deployed multiple suicide bombers mainly involving high-profile surprise attacks against AMISOM. A salient example is the January 2016 El Adde attack, where militants killed over 150 soldiers at a Kenyan AMISOM base in one of the deadliest attacks on the mission since its inception in 2007.56

However, prior to the targeted killing, the majority of the fatalities caused by single (64.30%) and multiple suicide attacks (66.07%) were civilians. However, this trend was partially reversed in the events following the killing, when the majority of fatalities of single suicide attacks were combatants (59.26%), though for multiple suicide operations, the majority of fatalities (58.75%) were still civilians. The high number of combatant fatalities resulted from well-coordinated single suicide attacks against AMISOM bases. More than 50 Ugandan soldiers were killed in southern Somalia when Al-Shabaab fighters attacked AMISOM’s Janale base in September 2015. Two months earlier, 54 Burundian AMISOM soldiers were killed at their Leego base in another notable operation. As previously mentioned, a Kenyan AMISOM base in El Adde was also attacked by Al-Shabaab fighters in
January 2016, which led to the deaths or imprisonment of approximately 150 Kenyan soldiers. An Ethiopian base was also attacked by Al-Shabaab, in June 2016.

Civilians continued to be primary victims of Al-Shabaab's attacks, and this is reflected in the data, where attacks against civilians after the targeted killing increased 200% for single suicide attacks and 100% for multiple suicide operations.

One factor that possibly influenced Al-Shabaab to prioritize and intensify single suicide operations as opposed to multiple suicide operations is that single suicide operations are significantly easier to deploy, requiring only a single operative and few resources in comparison to coordinated multiple suicide operations.

*After the targeting error*

Following the Zoobe attack, Al-Shabaab averaged less than one single suicide attack per month – a decrease of 72.86% – while multiple suicide operations averaged less than one every two months, a significant decrease of 52.38%.

The number of single suicide bombers deployed during this period equaled 20, indicating a 71.43% drop compared to the previous period. A similar finding was observed for multiple suicide operations, which showed a 58% decrease in number of bombers after the Zoobe incident (see Figure 3).

*Figure 3 here*

After the Zoobe targeting error, Al-Shabaab targeted fewer areas frequented by civilians, but their suicide attacks still led to a high number of civilian deaths, with civilians making up 86.66% of all fatalities for single suicide attacks and 70% for multiple suicide operations (this does not include the civilian deaths of the Zoobe targeting error, see Table 1). Most of these civilian deaths were from attacks targeted at prominent hotels in Somalia.
Al-Shabaab's targeting patterns changed drastically after the targeting error, with a 79.16% reduction in single suicide attacks against civilian targets and a 33.33% reduction in multiple suicide operations. Before the targeting error, the majority of targets for single suicide attacks were civilian hotspots, such as hotels (7), public spaces (i.e., markets, busy intersections and commercial streets) (12) and restaurants (5). Following the period after the Zoobe attack, the majority of civilian targets of Al-Shabaab single suicide attacks were hotels frequented by government employees and foreign visitors. This pattern was also observed for multiple suicide operations, where the majority of targets were hotels (4).

Table 1 here

Discussion

This study investigated the impact that the targeted killing of Godane and Al-Shabaab's targeting error in the Zoobe suicide attack have had on Al-Shabaab's tactical decisions in deploying single and multiple suicide attacks. I will now discuss the findings of this study regarding the empirical predictions made in Section 2. In this section, I argue that there is evidence that targeted killing triggers an increased frequency of single suicide attacks targeting civilian spaces but that this does not lead to a simultaneous decrease in attacks against military targets. I argue that, after the killing of Godane, the group became more brazen and lethal in their suicide operations against AMISOM targets. Targeting errors involving large-scale civilian deaths have had a significant impact on Al-Shabaab's suicide operations, leading to a substantial reduction in their suicide attacks against civilian spaces. Hotels, where government officials and civilians are known to congregate, were still targeted, albeit at a lesser rate, because of their perceived high value.
Leadership decapitation leads to increased suicide attacks against civilian and military targets

The first empirical prediction was that, following the killing of Godane, there would be an increase in single suicide attacks, as a vengeful response to the killing. As previously noted, literature on the efficacy of leadership decapitation is mixed, with a number of scholars arguing that leadership decapitation is ineffective and inevitably triggers more violence, while others argue that leadership decapitation can be effective if it is operationalized under certain conditions.

Based on the data, there is evidence that leadership decapitation significantly increased the potency of Al-Shabaab. Even though the killing of Godane deprived Al-Shabaab of its longest-ruling emir and chief ideologue and strategist, Al-Shabaab's leadership mechanism – the Shura Council – appointed a successor just five days after his death, thereby filling the leadership gap and demonstrating noticeable resilience. The killing spurred a massive wave of retaliatory responses, the majority of them being single suicide attacks – an increase of 84.2% compared to the period before the killing – and a slight increase in multiple suicide operations (16.6%). Indeed, Ganor's 'terrorism equation' proposes that two requisite elements are needed for a terrorist attack to materialize: sufficient motivation and sufficient resources. Motivated by simple cost-benefit analysis, the group substantially reduced its use of multiple suicide attacks, which require high-level planning and extensive resources, and instead deployed single suicide bombers to quickly exact vengeance and outwardly communicate the group's resilience.

The data also partially confirms that targeted killings increases the propensity of violence against civilians but does not necessarily decrease attacks against military targets. Indeed, there was a 50% increase in single suicide attacks against hard targets (Somali and AMISOM) while multiple suicide operations increased by 25%. One causal factor that potentially influenced the increase in violence against civilians is the drive for vengeance.
When a militant leader is eliminated, organization members might be imbued with an emotional reaction to carry out an immediate reprisal, often directed against civilians if they are suspected of having collaborated with the "enemy".67 Indeed, a number of scholars have argued that leadership decapitation both increase the likelihood of attacks against civilians and decreases the likelihood of attacks against military targets 68. This implies that the killing of a militant group's leader decreases the group's striking capability, meaning it is forced to settle for less difficult targets. Scholars have interpreted this as evidence that militant groups suffer from principal-agent problems, whereby organizations with a weak leadership and little control over the rank and file become more likely to target primarily undefended civilians.69 However, there is strong evidence that this was not the case for Al-Shabaab. Following the immediate ascension of Godane's protégé and successor, Ahmed Umar, the group maintained a similar organizational structure and resilience. Furthermore, prior to his death, Godane successfully navigated Al-Shabaab's leadership through critical periods of internal discord and infighting; this arguably ensured that his vision did not become ablated after his death. Indeed, this is reflected in Umar's tactical choices in deploying different suicide methods to demonstrate the group's organizational resilience.70

While the number of single suicide attacks against civilians increased significantly, the majority of the casualties were reported in attacks against military targets (AMISOM and Somali National Army (SNA)). In the first year after the targeted killing, 42.86% of Al-Shabaab's single suicide attacks were aimed at AMISOM forward operating bases, while the remainder were directed at the Somali government (28.57%) and civilians (28.57%). The strategic importance of this cannot be underestimated considering that Al-Shabaab deployed single suicide attacks against three AMISOM forward bases in 13 months after Godane's death – Leego in June 2015, Janaale in September 2015, and El Adde in January 2016 – killing at least 289 AMISOM soldiers and taking large quantities of military equipment,
weapons, and explosives.\textsuperscript{71} This important finding contradicts existing studies that argue that leadership decapitation forces militant groups to shift the target selection from military to civilians\textsuperscript{72}. Abrahms and Mierau find that “[when] leaderships are debilitated in a successful strike, militant groups become far less discriminate in their target selection by redirecting their violence from military to civilian targets”.\textsuperscript{73} While a greater propensity of violence was directed at civilian spaces, Al-Shabaab managed to upkeep their rate of single attacks against military targets.

However, this was not the case for multiple suicide attacks in the first year after Godane's death; this tactic was primarily deployed against civilian targets (66.66%), virtually all hotels. However, hotels in Somalia, particularly Mogadishu, invest heavily in their own security, and some are built like fortresses, surrounded by a double layer of thick, high, concrete walls. These hotels often host high level government officials and foreign visitors, and this unsurprisingly has made them an especially attractive target for Al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab's spokesperson, Sheikh Ali Dheere, in underscoring the group's rationale for targeting hotels, stated that they do not target any hotel in Mogadishu but those "frequented by government officials and intelligence agents" and warns "civilians to stay away".\textsuperscript{74} In doing so, Al-Shabaab elevates hotels from its traditional soft-target space to a hard-target status. More importantly, following Godane's death, this justification most likely allowed the group to deploy coordinated multiple suicide operations against civilian spaces, rapidly increase civilian deaths and simultaneously send a message of deterrence to the "civilian spies". This establishes that Al-Shabaab strategically deploys different types of suicide operations for different reasons.

\textit{Targeting errors forces decline in suicide attacks}

The second empirical prediction was that following the Zoobe junction attack, there would be
a decrease in the single and multiple suicide attacks carried out by Al-Shabaab. A group's actual public constituency offers popular support that enables the group and increases their legitimacy. Often, some tacit support for suicide attacks exists among what has been called the organization's "constituency". However, these (sometimes imagined) constituencies do not have an unlimited tolerance for violence, and if a group is perceived as using indiscriminate violence against civilians, they run the risk of losing public support and sympathy, with a possibility of loss of reputation or at worst, enabling the group's demise.

Based on the data, there is evidence that Al-Shabaab reduced its overall suicide attacks (single and multiple). In the first 24 months after the Zoobe junction attack, single suicide attacks dropped by almost half (48.72%) when compared to the 24 months after Godane's death. More interestingly, the targeting error and subsequent backlash forced the group to significantly reduce its operations in areas frequented by civilians. Indeed, the period following the Zoobe incident saw an almost 80% reduction in single suicide attacks against civilian targets and a 33.33% reduction in multiple suicide operations. Before the targeting error, the majority of targets of single suicide attacks were civilian hotspots such as hotels (7), public spaces (i.e., markets, busy intersections and commercial streets) (12), and restaurants (5). In the period following the Zoobe attack, the majority civilian areas targeted in Al-Shabaab single suicide attacks were hotels frequented by government employees and foreign visitors. Hotels in Mogadishu are heavily guarded and serve as a base for assorted actors, including the political elite, government officials, and international visitors. As a result, these hotels do not have traditional soft-target status and are viewed as symbolic and high-value hard targets.

Public outrage and internal rifts within the group over its brutal tactic contributed to the reduction of their suicide operations following the Zoobe targeting error. One of the founding members of Al-Shabaab, Mukhtar Robow, who defected two months prior to the
Zoobe targeting error, remarked that for over ten years he had repeatedly warned the group not to target civilian spaces because this would inevitably invite a strong public reaction and increase dissent among Al-Shabaab members.\textsuperscript{79} Two months after the attack, Somalia’s Minister of Internal Security, Abukar Islow, announced that 54 Al-Shabaab members have defected as a result of the Zoobe incident.\textsuperscript{80} In January 2020, two senior members of Al-Shabaab (Mahad Karate and Bashir Qorqab) were fired by the militant group’s leader, Ahmad Umar, after they asked him to stop targeting civilians.\textsuperscript{81} Moreover, there are historical examples of militant groups reducing their attacks or "imploding"\textsuperscript{82} following a targeting error\textsuperscript{83}.

Al-Shabaab has never claimed responsibility for the Zoobe attack, despite being the only actor capable of an assault of that magnitude. Al-Shabaab’s unwillingness to claim responsibility indicated disquiet within its senior ranks regarding the scale of civilian deaths, which increased the public hostility toward Al-Shabaab.\textsuperscript{84} The internal dissatisfaction within Al-Shabaab manifested in a surge of defections, with one Al-Shabaab explosives expert voicing his dissatisfaction by confessing that he was "touched by the large number of casualties in the Zoobe bombing".\textsuperscript{85} The attack purportedly leveled businesses owned by senior Al-Shabaab members, contributing to a frustration within the group's senior management.\textsuperscript{86}

Al-Shabaab, like Al-Qaeda, is mindful of public opinion and the value of social capital.\textsuperscript{87} Clearly, claiming responsibility for targeting errors can be detrimental to a group's survival\textsuperscript{88} as it relies on some form of popular support.\textsuperscript{89} Since its inception, Al-Shabaab developed some limited governance functions that demonstrates its ability to exercise public authority and supplant local and state government institutions. It filled a vacuum by providing political, economic goods and services in the areas that it controlled. Some of these basic essential services included access to health care, predictable economic regulation,
conflict dispute mechanisms and safety. It used its service provisions to claim increased authority and perceived legitimacy.90 Activity at the community/grassroots level was a fundamental component of Al-Shabaab's strategy to sustain its operations by continuously expanding its local community infrastructure and support. The group honed its target selection in its incipient phases after being rebuked by Al-Qaeda for killing other Muslims in attacks that targeted public places or were aimed at a single or a few high-profile individuals and that were likely to result in collateral damage.91

Study implications and future research

This article has sought to add to the existing literature on targeted killings and suicide terrorism and has filled an important gap regarding how leadership decapitation and targeting errors can affect militant groups' suicide operations. This is the first study of its kind that investigates how Al-Shabaab adjusted its single and multiple suicide operations in response to the targeted killing of Godane and targeting error of Zoobe incident. The results have interesting implications for understanding how different events (leadership decapitation and targeting errors) affect such groups' tactical choices in deploying suicide attacks.

First, it was found that the killing of Al-Shabaab's leader, Godane, led to a significant increase in single suicide attacks against civilians but, more importantly, it also led to more daring and coordinated operations against military targets (both Somali and foreign). To send a message of defiance and resilience, the group tactically deployed the less sophisticated single suicide operations as opposed the coordinated multiple suicide operations that might necessitate greater resources. More importantly, this finding accentuates the growing literature on decapitation strikes that argue that even though the elimination of militant leaders might affect groups' strategies of target selection and preferences on attack modalities, the decapitation of terrorist leaders do not appear to reduce the frequency of these attacks, nor the number of fatalities but instead bolsters militant groups' resolve and strength.
Second, Al-Shabaab considers itself as a legitimate state actor and is perceived as such by those under its rule. Due to its need for legitimacy to govern, the group is susceptible to public opinion. The targeting error in the Zoobe bombing damaged Al-Shabaab considerably, with a wave of defections, public anger, and internal rifts. This contributed to Al-Shabaab recalculating the cost-benefit balance of conducting further suicide operations and its avoidance of civilian spaces as potential targets, with the exception of heavily guarded hotels frequented by government officials and foreign visitors.

With the knowledge that targeting errors are Al-Shabaab's 'Achilles' heel', counter-terrorism strategies should include efforts to publicize the miscalculations made by militant groups in order to undermine their support and facilitate a public backlash. This public backlash will diminish their legitimacy, reduce their use of suicide operations and accelerate what Cronin92 refers to as "implosion".

While the Zoobe incident is not the sole targeting error of Al-Shabaab, future studies could examine the longitudinal timeline of targeting miscalculations committed by Al-Shabaab and how that affects their suicide operations. Moreover, the scope of this research could be broadened by analyzing international cross-case comparisons of how targeting errors and leadership decapitation affects the suicide operations of other militant groups. This will enhance the generalisability of this study's findings and augment the nascent literature evaluating the efficacy of leadership decapitation and the negative repercussion of targeting errors.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).
Notes


30 “Targeting Top Terrorists: How Leadership Decapitation Contributes to Counterterrorism.”

31 Price.

32 “Does Decapitation Work? Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Targeting in Counterinsurgency Campaigns.”


35 Jordan, “Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark: Why Terrorist Groups Survive Decapitation Strikes.”

36 Byman, “Do Targeted Killings Work?”

37 “Do Targeted Killings Work?”


39 Cronin, How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns.


42 Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*.

43 Cronin.

44 Ibrahim Shire and Hersi, “Brothers in Arms: The Phenomenon of Complex Suicide Attacks”;

Warner and Chapin, “Targeted Terror: The Suicide Bombers of Al-Shabaab.”


47 Burke, “Mogadishu Truck Bomb: 500 Casualties in Somalia’s Worst Terrorist Attack.”

48 Radio Galgaduud, “Sarkaal Katirsanaa Alshabaab Oo Isku Soo Dhiibay Ciidamada Dowlada,”


57 Kriel and Duggan.


PuntlandPost, “Islow-‘63-Shabaab Ahaa Ayaa La Qabtay Kadib Qaraxii Isgoyka Zoobe.’”


Cronin, How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns.

Cronin.


Laden, “Letter to Abu Muhammed Salah.”

Cronin, How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns.
Figure 1. Number of suicide attacks committed each month by Al-Shabaab, September 2011 - December 2019

Figure 2. Suicide bombers deployed every 6 months
Table 1. Disaggregation of suicide attacks over the three periods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Total attacks</th>
<th>Combatants (deaths)</th>
<th>Civilians (deaths)</th>
<th>Civilians targets</th>
<th>Somali targets</th>
<th>Foreign targets</th>
<th>Failed targets</th>
<th>Claimed attacks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Before targeted killing</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>70.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>61.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>After targeted killing</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>534</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>81.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>90.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>After targeting error</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>