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To cite this article: Mohammed Ibrahim Shire (2021): Provocation and Attrition Strategies in Transnational Terrorism: The Case of Al-Shabaab, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, DOI: [10.1080/09546553.2021.1987896](https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1987896)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1987896>



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Published online: 03 Nov 2021.



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# Provocation and Attrition Strategies in Transnational Terrorism: The Case of Al-Shabaab

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## ABSTRACT

Scholars have identified a range of terrorist strategies that militant groups employ to influence intended audiences, but there is scant empirical validation. Following Kenya's invasion of Somalia in late 2011, Al-Shabaab executed retaliatory terrorist attacks in Kenya with the strategic aim to compel the withdrawal of Kenyan troops from Somalia. Drawing on unique in-depth interviews with Al-Shabaab defectors and civilian witnesses to counterterrorism measures in Kenya, this article investigates the strategic motives underlying Al-Shabaab's transnational terrorist operations and assesses the effect these have had on the intended audiences. The empirical findings reveal that the attrition strategy has underpinned Al-Shabaab's major terrorist attacks (large-scale events) whilst their minor terrorist attacks (small-scale events) have been motivated by the provocation strategy, aimed at eliciting a repressive state overreaction against Kenya's Somali and Muslim minorities. Whilst the major terrorist attacks succeeded in fomenting the Kenyan public's anti-war views, this did not result in troop withdrawal; the minor terrorist attacks, however, engendered harsh state repression and draconian measures against Kenya's Somali and Muslim minorities, ultimately exacerbating existing grievances and channelling fresh recruits to Al-Shabaab. This article contributes to the growing literature on terrorist strategies, offering nuanced empirical insights to understanding the strategic motives underpinning transnational terrorist campaigns. The article demonstrates that transnational terrorism campaigns are rooted in the strategic need to influence different audiences abroad. Depending on militant groups' short- and long-term objectives, the type of attack indicates the type of terrorist strategy they will employ.

## KEYWORDS

Al-Shabaab; Kenya; transnational terrorism; strategies; provocation; attrition; Somalia

## Introduction

On 16 October 2011, Kenya's armed forces invaded southern Somalia, ostensibly to protect the country from violence wrought by the Al Qaeda-aligned militant group, Harakat Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen (henceforth, Al-Shabaab).<sup>1</sup> Kenyan forces captured the strategic port of Kismayo, Al-Shabaab's last major southern stronghold, and were "rehabbed" within the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) force that had been battling Al-Shabaab since 2007.<sup>2</sup> Much to the distress of the local population in southern Somalia, the Kenyan intervention engineered an emergent proxy state, called Jubbaland, and installed a pro-Kenyan former Al-Shabaab member and warlord, Ahmed Madobe, as its head.<sup>3</sup> Al-Shabaab retaliated by launching a violent terrorist campaign inside Kenya, vowing to sustain the campaign until Kenya withdrew its troops from Somalia.<sup>4</sup>

This article seeks to advance our understanding of the different strategies militant organisations embed in their retaliatory transnational terrorist campaigns by offering empirical insights from Kenya and Somalia. In doing so, it investigates the strategic motivations guiding Al-Shabaab's transnational

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terrorist operations and assesses the resultant effect these have had on the intended audiences of those attacks. In identifying and mapping the strategic intents of Al-Shabaab's terrorist attacks in Kenya, I draw on conflict datasets and unique in-depth interviews with Al-Shabaab defectors. In assessing the effects of terrorist attacks on the intended audiences, I draw on in-depth interviews with Kenyan Somali civilians who have witnessed state countermeasures to Al-Shabaab attacks, press reports, and national surveys.

Rationalist literature suggests that terrorism is strategic violence in which civilians are the target but not always the intended audience of that violence.<sup>5</sup> Scholars have developed an understanding of the range of terrorist strategies employed to influence different intended audiences, with some suggesting that terrorism “works,”<sup>6</sup> whilst others contend that terrorism rarely contributes to the achievement of militant groups' end goals, unless those strategies are measured in terms of two distinct goals: “process” goals (sustaining the militant organisation) and “outcome” goals (achieving stated political ends).<sup>7</sup> This article adopts the latter perspective, dividing militant organisation's objectives into “process” and “outcome” goals. The two strategies most relevant to militant groups' strategic interactions with state actors are attrition (an outcome goal) and provocation (a process goal),<sup>8</sup> which have been successfully employed by several militant organisations. Examples of successful attrition strategies include the 1937–1947 terrorism campaign conducted by the Jewish militant group, *Irgun*, causing the United Kingdom to offer negotiations and significant concessions, including the withdrawal from Palestine.<sup>9</sup> Whilst there is a growing body of research that considers the strategic utility of civilian targeting, an important criticism raised in terrorism studies argues that this approach fails to identify the intended “audiences that groups seek to influence,” and thus reduces these scholars' ability to make “accurate inferences.”<sup>10</sup> A small number of articles have made attempts to assess the different terrorist tactics groups employ and the audiences they intend to influence,<sup>11</sup> but these studies suffer from an overreliance on incident metrics and secondary data rather than draw primary data from respondents directly involved in creating violence.

This article makes several contributions—both theoretically and empirically—to the existing debate over terrorist strategies and whether terrorism is an effective tool for achieving political goals. Using Al-Shabaab as a case study, I argue that militant groups that engage in transnational terrorism employ disparate terrorist tactics for a number of strategic motives. I argue that their transnational terrorist operations are undergirded by a strategic need to successfully influence intended audiences abroad in achieving their process and outcome goals.

This article accordingly provides important empirical contributions. First, by dichotomising Al-Shabaab's terrorist operations in Kenya into major and minor attacks, it provides unique insights on how Al-Shabaab employs a distinct strategy for each type of attack. Al-Shabaab's major terrorist attacks in Kenya (e.g., highly publicised, spectacular attacks) are guided by a strategy of attrition, which serves to influence Kenyan public opinion towards pressuring their government to withdraw troops from Somalia. By contrast, the group's minor terrorist attacks in Kenya (e.g., throwing grenades into civilian spaces and kidnappings) are primarily driven by the provocation strategy, intending to goad and provoke a severe and draconian overreaction from the Kenyan government against its Somali and Muslim communities.

Second, the findings reveal that, whilst these two distinct strategies underpin Al-Shabaab's transnational terrorist attacks, the group had relative success in influencing both audiences (i.e., civilian and government audiences). First, Al-Shabaab's major terrorist attacks increasingly fuelled public anti-war sentiment in Kenya, although it did not translate into partial or full Kenyan withdrawal from Somalia. This was most visible in the areas affected by Al-Shabaab's major terrorist attacks. Second, Al-Shabaab's minor terrorist attacks prompted the Kenyan state to deploy indiscriminate dragnets and draconian measures against Al-Shabaab's envisaged constituents in Kenya (i.e., Somali and Muslim communities), which heavily contributed to Al-Shabaab gaining recruits.

This article proceeds further by examining key strands of existing research on terrorist strategies. It then introduces the theoretical argument on the strategic logic of transnational terrorism. After the presentation of the argument, this article proceeds with discussing the data and empirical

methodology. This section is followed by empirical discussion and presentation of findings. This article concludes by summarising findings and contributions as well as discussing prospects for further research on the topic of transnational terrorist strategies.

## Transnational terrorism and terrorist strategies

### *Terrorist strategies*

Before investigating the strategic logics of transnational terrorism, it first bears asking: What makes terrorism salient?<sup>12</sup> At its core, terrorism is a violent discourse, aimed at influencing the thoughts and emotions of an intended audience beyond the immediate victims.<sup>13</sup> These targeted third-party audiences can include governments (domestic or foreign), passive public, perceived or supporting constituency of the militant group, perceived sympathisers, and rival militant organisations.<sup>14</sup>

Scholars have identified a range of terrorist strategies that militant groups adopt in influencing specific audiences. Whilst there is consensus in extant literature that militant groups often adopt diverse terrorist strategies to seek to alter the behaviour and thinking of these different social groups, there is, however, a considerable scholarly discord on the political efficacy of these strategies. Some scholars argue that the tactical use of terrorism serves in meeting militant groups' stated objectives, emphasising that overall terrorism is effective in gaining political concessions.<sup>15</sup> One predominant explanation highlights that terrorism functions as a "costly signal" to an adversary regarding a group's commitment and ability to inflict harm.<sup>16</sup> Kydd and Walter suggest that terrorist organisations adopt one of five strategies when planning attacks: attrition, intimidation, provocation, spoiling, and outbidding—as initially described by Thornton<sup>17</sup> and Crenshaw.<sup>18</sup> Attrition is based on the coercive logic of terrorism and is intended to signal capacity to the government, whereas provocation should induce a violent overreaction from the state, which it is hoped will enhance the legitimacy of and support for militant groups. Intimidation, by contrast, aims at deterring the population from supporting the government. Spoiling and outbidding are mechanisms employed in specific situations where multiple groups or factions are active—the former is designed to prevent peace deals that exclude the spoiler, the latter is a means to outbid competition in garnering public support.

Other scholars have argued that terrorism is a weak political strategy when measured solely by its contribution to the achievement of a militant group's ultimate goals but can be effective when measured against a group's long-term and organisational goals, i.e., its "outcome goals" and "process goals," respectively.<sup>19</sup> Outcome goals directly contribute to a group's ultimate goal, which may include the expulsion of foreign forces, the overthrow of a regime, or the acquisition of a territorial homeland. The realisation of each of these goals requires the enemy government to acquiesce to the militant group's demands.<sup>20</sup> Conversely, process goals indirectly contribute to the outcome goals and might include recruiting followers, gaining monetary resources, fomenting government opposition, and securing public support.<sup>21</sup> In this respect, Kydd and Walter's conceptualisation of terrorist strategies can be re-interpreted as process goals except for the attrition strategy which essentially contributes to a militant group's outcome goal. Only a few militant groups, however, achieve their outcome goals; they typically have more success in achieving process goals. Indeed, most early studies have largely focused on the coercive effects of terrorism at the macro level, whilst less attention has been dedicated to how organisational and microlevel goals strategically aid a group's outcome goals. Following the lead of the latter scholarly stance, this article distinguishes between a militant group's outcome goals and the process goals that enable the militant group to sustain its activities over time.

Understandably, scholars have spent a considerable amount in mapping the broader strategies underpinning the use of terrorism, however, there is limited research that empirically validates whom militant groups seek to influence and what types of goals underpin their terrorist tactics. The scant literature that has looked at this phenomenon have proposed several arguments. Some scholars attribute causal importance to a single nominal terrorist strategy (e.g., exclusively attrition or intimidation strategy). For instance, following a content analysis of Al Qaeda's *Inspire* magazine, Novenario

argues that Al Qaeda consistently employs “attrition [strategy] to compel changes in the West’s policy.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Pape contends that militant groups use suicide terrorism as an attrition strategy to gain concessions and inflict maximum damage.<sup>23</sup> Other researchers propose that groups sequentially employ an array of terrorist strategies over their lifespans. In assessing the Basque’s ETA strategic violence, Mahoney finds that from 1968 to 2011, ETA separately employed four separate terrorist strategies (provocation, outbidding, attrition and spoiling) in stages.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the Tamil Tigers engaged in fratricidal violence (outbidding) in the mid-1980s before adopting a strategy of attrition.<sup>25</sup> Finally, other scholars theorise that organisations might employ multiple strategic logics of terrorism simultaneously in their attacks. Kydd and Walter claim that,

The 11 September terrorist attacks ... were probably part of both an attrition strategy and a provocation strategy. By targeting the heart of the United States’ financial district, Al-Qaeda may have been attempting to increase the cost of the U.S. policy of stationing soldiers in Saudi Arabia. But by targeting prominent symbols of American economic and military power, Al-Qaeda may also have been trying to goad the United States into an extreme military response that would serve Al-Qaeda’s larger goal of radicalising the world’s Muslim population.<sup>26</sup>

However, much of the existing literature that examine the presence of terrorist strategies and their intended audience do so through the lens of a terrorist group’s tactical methods, including target selection and attack methods. Gupta argues that an organisation reveals its ideological orientation through its actions.<sup>27</sup> However, scholars such as Mahoney insistently accentuate that “methods organisations use to carry out terrorist incidents do not reveal information about the audiences extremists seek to influence. For this reason, terrorist tactics—including suicide terrorism—do not in and of themselves divulge the logic underlying organisations’ signaling.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed motives cannot be inferred by only examining patterns in their target selection and attack methods, for it negates the contextual factors surrounding terrorist tactics. Importantly, the absence of any information that maps groups’ decision-making processes in employing terrorism makes it challenging to draw credible inferences about the strategic utility of terrorism.

### ***The strategic logic of transnational terrorism***

Domestic and transnational terrorism campaigns are, for the most part, motivated by a group’s identical ultimate goals. In other words, whether a group conducts domestic or transnational terrorists’ attacks is rooted in an outcome goal of effecting a political change in their home country. Transnational terrorism is often the product of third-party military interventions. Extant studies have observed that militant groups have strategically attacked intervening third parties that stood in the way of achieving their domestic goals and coercing them to disengage from the militant group’s local territory.<sup>29</sup> Pape and Feldman contend that transnational suicide terrorism is an extension of the logic of military occupation, where individuals participate in a mission in response to foreign occupation of another country.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Piazza and Choi find that military interventions centred around politico-strategic objectives (e.g., interference in another country’s domestic disputes, territorial interventions, or interventions to affect local politics and policy) result in retaliatory transnational terrorist attacks.<sup>31</sup> Savun and Phillips echo this observation, suggesting that democratic states are not targets of transnational attacks because they are democratic, but rather because of the aggressive foreign policies they pursue.<sup>32</sup>

There are several salient examples that support a link between foreign interventions and transnational terrorist campaigns. For instance, the 2004 and 2005 suicide bombings of public transport systems in Madrid and London were, according to the perpetrators, a retaliation against Spanish and British participation in the 2003 U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Al-Shabaab’s twin bombings in 2010 in Kampala that killed at least 74 civilians were claimed by Al-Shabaab to be retribution for Uganda’s military deployment in Somalia.<sup>34</sup> The Irish Republican Army employed various transnational urban terrorist and guerrilla warfare tactics during the 1939–40 campaign in

England, which included bombing and sabotage against the civil, economic, and military infrastructure of England.<sup>35</sup> Within this study's context, Kenya's intervention in neighbouring Somalia in October 2011 precipitated Al-Shabaab to launch a violent campaign inside Kenya.

This article contends that the two principal terrorist strategies most relevant to militant groups' strategic interaction with foreign military interventions are attrition and provocation. The remaining strategies, namely, intimidation, outbidding and spoiling are typically associated with domestic terrorism.<sup>36</sup> Whilst extant literature identifies attrition and provocation strategies as being used to pursue outcome goals (regime and territorial change),<sup>37</sup> this article instead repositions them as an outcome and process goal respectively. The article argues that militant groups that engage in transnational terrorism do so for various motives, both short- and long-term goals. The attrition strategy is employed to signal the capacity or resolve to inflict large-scale human or material damage in order to coerce concrete political concessions.<sup>38</sup> A key feature of this strategy is that the attacks are explicitly designed to directly influence the opinion of civilian populations (often in democracies) and so that they press their governments for concessions, for example, the withdrawal of foreign troops from militant groups' perceived homelands.<sup>39</sup> Pertinent examples of terrorist groups achieving relative success using the attrition strategy include the Jewish militant group *Irgun* in Palestine, *Ethniki Organosis Kyprion Agoniston* in Cyprus and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

By contrast, the provocation strategy is intended to provoke enemy states rather than get them to concede.<sup>40</sup> Specifically, this strategy is designed to trigger an indiscriminate retaliation from the government against the militant group's envisaged constituency (e.g., co-ethnics or co-religionists). The overreaction of the state can advance militant groups' organisational goals, such as enhanced recruitment or support from local populations.<sup>41</sup> Instead of gaining concessions directly, which the attrition strategy is premised upon, this helps groups realise process goals that sustain the group and potentially increase their capacity to launch more attacks in the future. The *Basque's Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA) initially adopted a strategy of provocation in its terrorist campaign, aiming to cause the Franco regime to repress the Basque population.<sup>42</sup>

Positioning attrition and provocation strategies within the contours of outcome and process goals, it permits an effective mapping of how militant groups' disparate transnational terrorist attacks contribute to either process or outcome goals. Transnational terrorist attacks are typically categorised "as normal event [minor attack] with a modest impact or a spectacular event [major attack] with a high death toll or a symbolic nature."<sup>43</sup> As shown in Table 1, this article contends that militant organisations launch minor transnational terrorist attacks as part of a provocation strategy (a process goal) whilst major transnational attacks are underpinned by attrition strategy (an outcome goal). Domestically, many militant organisations have operationalised major and minor terrorist operations to elicit specific responses. For instance, during the 1970s, the West-German Red Army Faction actively and successfully provoked reactions vastly disproportionate to the violence they unleashed.<sup>44</sup> To force out foreign forces stationed in Lebanon, Hezbollah launched two major suicide operations against the Multinational Force in Lebanon in Beirut on 23 October 1983, killing 307 people, including 241 U.S. and 58 French military personnel. The attacks prompted the full withdrawal of Western military forces from Lebanon.<sup>45</sup> Finally, Fedotenkov concluded in a recent study that examines terrorist attacks and public approval in Russia that minor attacks enable increased securitisation of Russian Muslims whilst major attacks reduce the incumbent's public support.<sup>46</sup>

**Table 1.** Transnational terrorist strategies.

Type of attack	Strategy	Target audience	Intended outcome/process goal
Major terrorist attacks	Attrition	Civilian audience	Influence civilian audience to pressure their government to make political concessions
Minor terrorist attacks	Provocation	Government audience	Provoke governments into repression

## Data and methods

To investigate the strategies underpinning Al-Shabaab's terrorist attacks in Kenya and assess their effect on the intended audiences, evidence is drawn from a variety of sources. This includes 87 in-depth interviews conducted between March 2019 and July 2019 with two distinct groups: 31 Al-Shabaab defectors, and 56 civilian eyewitnesses to the Kenyan military's countermeasures in Kenya. The data also include an Al-Shabaab transnational attacks dataset constructed by the author. Finally, other sources were employed to triangulate the data such as academic literature, national surveys, videos, news articles, official statements, and official reports.

### *Interview data and public sources*

#### *Ethics and biased considerations*

Gaining access to research participants involved or affected by political violence is often challenging.<sup>47</sup> Given the relative difficulty and associated safety concerns with interviewing terrorists, most researchers have turned to prison to conduct interviews with those convicted of terrorist offences.<sup>48</sup> However, researchers have criticised the reliability of interviews obtained from imprisoned terrorists. For instance, Horgan argues that much of what is said by such individual terrorists about ideology is rooted in post hoc invention.<sup>49</sup> This is compounded by the belief that terrorists may provide false or misleading information for several reasons, including the need "to discredit others, to avoid perceived threats associated with divulging information, to aggrandise their own role in events, through unwitting self-deception, or simply because their memories are flawed."<sup>50</sup> Nilsson contends that former terrorists who are not in prison do not suffer from this dilemma as they no longer have the "ideological convictions they once used to [have to] justify their actions."<sup>51</sup> Moreover, since this study is purely focused on establishing the macro strategies underpinning Al-Shabaab's terrorist operations instead of past individual conduct, the proclivity to provide misleading statements is significantly reduced.

I used purposive and snowball sampling for both respondent groups by reaching out to individuals via their respective clan elders. Clan elders are often perceived as the gatekeepers of the community and custodians of the culture. In the case of Al-Shabaab defectors, clan elders act as guarantors. Depending on their risk rating, low-risk Al-Shabaab defectors are transferred to centres designed for ex-combatant rehabilitation and reintegration whilst high-risk defectors are sent to the military court, often facing the death penalty. A third group, the so-called high-value defectors, are usually placed under government house arrest or co-opted into the Somali government. In parallel to this formal process, clan elders also facilitate defection informally, leading many Al-Shabaab defectors to re-join society without government knowledge.<sup>52</sup>

The biggest challenge I have encountered was assuring confidentiality. In such circumstances, adopting localised considerations on how questions are phrased and managing the risk of emotional distress becomes increasingly paramount. As such, interviews were predicated on ethics considerations and included obtaining University ethics approval, and a letter of permission was secured from Somalia's national intelligence agency, the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA). To assuage suspicion and distrust from Al-Shabaab defectors who defected informally, I explained to participants that all collected information will be treated with full confidentiality and that no personal names (of persons) will be mentioned or kept. Moreover, I highlighted that the research design was first screened and approved by the independent ethics committee of the researcher's university. Notably, I adopted what Dawar<sup>53</sup> referred to as "mutual confidentiality," which is an approach that encourages "both the researcher and the researched to agree not to disclose relevant information about each other to a third party."<sup>54</sup> The Somali culture has an unwritten but largely accepted traditional of conduct. Two important rules are the implacability of the importance of keeping promises and maintaining a positive track record. Rooted in religious sentiments, the Somali culture equates breaking promises as someone who does not believe in God anymore whilst

it warns people to first observe someone's *kabo* (shoes, or in other words, his track record) before establishing a social bond with an individual. By promising full confidentiality and demonstrating my positive track record of honesty and being frank, respondents were inclined to trust me and show a willingness to participate.

All interviews with Al-Shabaab defectors took place in Mogadishu in outdoor public spaces such as national parks and beaches, except for defectors placed under house arrest. The Somali culture has a strong social dimension, and exchanging important information during social interactions is the norm. All interactions with the interview pool involved tea (*shaah*) drinking—a symbol of hospitality in the Somali culture. Moreover, as I shared the same characteristics ethnically and linguistically as the interview pool, it created a relaxed social situation where professional distance was enforced and maintained. Nilsson remarks that the need to gain access to rich data from former and active terrorists requires “good gatekeepers and drinking *a lot* of tea.”<sup>55</sup> Their respective clan elders were present for the rank-and-file defectors whilst a NISA member accompanied defectors under house arrest. A clan elder's attendance not only reassures the interviewee, but it lowers the “risk of co-construction of reality.”<sup>56</sup>

For interviews conducted with civilian eyewitnesses, I placed significant importance in phrasing questions as neutral as possible, with localised and contextual examples, to not bias responses or invoke emotive reactions. Furthermore, since many of the respondents were victims of Kenya's violent countermeasures, sufficient provisions were established that demonstrated sensitivity and empathy. For instance, in cases of emotional distress when recounting a particularly traumatic episode, respondents were accorded appropriate time to express their feelings openly and remain silent for fairly lengthy periods without any interruptions. As a result, virtually all respondents verbally expressed that they felt much better after airing their thoughts. They argued that they finally felt that they were being listened to. Naturally, this type of interaction places significant emotional labour on the researcher, however, my past track record of interviewing thousands of Somali citizens and my personal experience of experiencing Somalia's Civil War enabled me to signal, at the right cues, an empathetic attitude (both verbally and non-verbally). Finally, all interviews ended on a lighter note thereby facilitating a smooth termination of the interview.

My positionality as an indigenous researcher facilitated the data collection process. The debate over the insider/outsider dichotomy is centred on the concept of objectivity. Shah argues that insiders can be expected to have a wide range of advantages when seeking to access meaning from participants.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, my background as an ethnic Somali and my extensive network within the different segments of the Somali population significantly impacted my fieldwork in Somalia. However, my positionality as a Somali insider and a diaspora outsider barred me from fitting neatly into the strict insider-outsider dichotomy. Scholars such as Banks have broadened the insider-outsider binary to a continuum with fluid identities.<sup>58</sup> Banks' concept of indigenous-outsider explains my positionality. An indigenous outsider has multiple methodological advantages vis-à-vis outsiders, including easy access to informants. Furthermore, an indigenous outsider possesses significant knowledge about the society before embarking on the research, allowing the researcher to “ask meaningful questions and read non-verbal cues,” and “project a more truthful, authentic understanding of the culture under study.”<sup>59</sup>

To guard against bias, I triangulated the interview data by using additional sources including academic literature, national surveys, videos, news articles, official statements and official reports. One particularly useful national survey that longitudinally maps the Kenyan public's attitude towards Kenya's involvement in Somalia is the Afrobarometer. The Afrobarometer is a systematic, cross-national survey of public attitudes in sub-Saharan Africa that has, since 2014, accurately gauged the Kenyan public opinion about the country's military involvement in neighbouring Somalia.<sup>60</sup>

### **Participants and interview procedure**

To map the strategies employed by Al-Shabaab, I conducted, in person, 31 in-depth interviews with Al-Shabaab defectors in Somalia. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. The inclusion criteria consisted of defectors who were 18 and older and participated

directly or indirectly in Al-Shabaab's violent operations in Kenya. The interview pool included a high-ranking member and six mid-ranking defectors, all of whom are presently under house arrest, and 24 rank-and-file defectors who disengaged using the informal process, bypassing government surveillance. Out of the 31 interlocutors, 20 respondents (seven former commanders and 13 former rank-and-file combatants) had participated in Al-Shabaab operations inside Kenya, whilst the remaining defectors ( $n = 11$ ) were stationed in Al-Shabaab-controlled villages straddling the border with Kenya. Thus, whilst rank-and-file combatants are not part of the group's decision-making process, they possess insights into the dynamics and inner workings of Al-Shabaab, particularly defectors who have actively participated in the group's operations inside Kenya. Moreover, Al-Shabaab has actively sought out rank-and-file defectors for fear of information leakage.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, to map Kenya's countermeasures in Kenya, I conducted, by telephone, 56 in-depth interviews with civilian witnesses to Kenya's countermeasures in Nairobi, ( $n = 10$ ), Mandera ( $n = 21$ ), and Garissa ( $n = 25$ ) counties in south-central and north-eastern Kenya. All respondents were ethnic Somalis and Kenyan nationals and have been directly or indirectly affected by Kenya's counterterrorism activities. Interviewed civilian witnesses were compensated \$10 for their participation, sent directly to their mobile wallet. All telephone interviews with civilian eyewitnesses were semi-structured and lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. Interviewees were asked to express their views and experiences in relation to Kenya's counterterrorism operations.

### *Thematic analysis*

All interviews (defectors and civilian eyewitnesses) were carried out in Somali and subsequently analysed using thematic analysis. This identifies themes and patterns that conceptually link expressions in the data regarding the research question.<sup>62</sup> Since all interviews were conducted under strict anonymity conditions, the interviewees' names/identifiers were replaced with code names.

### *Transnational attacks dataset and coding*

I constructed a dataset that maps Al-Shabaab's terrorist attacks in Kenya, consisting of a total of 210 incidents from October 2011 (Kenya's military incursion into Somalia) until the end of December 2019, including only those incidents where Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility or where at least two sources attributed blame to the group. The majority of the incidents in the Al-Shabaab Kenya dataset are derived from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). I analysed the data by extensively cross-referencing and validating it against news sources from October 2011 to December 2019 in the English and Somali languages, and missing incidents not found in the GTD but referenced in several news sources were added.

I subsequently divided Al-Shabaab terrorist attacks into two categories, namely, minor and major terrorist attacks. Minor terrorist attacks were those that were not well publicised (in either national and international media),<sup>63</sup> had relatively fewer casualties, and, although attributed to Al-Shabaab, were most of the time not claimed by the group. This category also included ransom kidnappings (both local and foreign), one example being the 18 March 2015 attack where armed Al-Shabaab fighters threw a grenade at a small shop in Wajir town, killing three civilians.<sup>64</sup> By contrast, infrequent and spectacular attacks that were well-coordinated, involving mass casualties, heavily publicised, and always claimed by Al-Shabaab were identified as major terrorist operations. The scale of these attacks and the publicity they garner typically prompts Kenya's president to make a national address, as was in the case of the 2013 Westgate mall attack and the 2015 Mpeketoni massacres.<sup>65</sup> Similar delineations were adopted by Yongo,<sup>66</sup> who used criteria related to the national mood and size of state response—i.e., if it is a major attack, it is addressed by Kenya's president and heavily covered in the press, whilst a minor attack is sometimes addressed by local security officials and attracts limited press coverage.

## Terrorism in Kenya

### *Al-Shabaab and Operation Linda Nchi*

Al-Shabaab was formed initially from the remnants of *Al-Itihaad al-Islaamiya*, a homegrown militant Islamist enterprise that emerged following the onset of Somalia's civil war, capturing strategic locations, establishing control, and enacting strict measures that brought some semblance of civil security to previously lawless areas.<sup>67</sup> The group's identity began to crystalize after December 2006, when Ethiopian forces backed with American air support invaded Somalia to dislodge the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) from Mogadishu and install the exiled, UN-recognised Transitional Federal Government (TFG). The invasion fractured the ICU but also allowed the nascent Al-Shabaab to capitalize on an upsurge of nationalism.<sup>68</sup> A power struggle in the early 2010s led to a violent purge of dissidents within the movement, enabling its maximalist members to take the reins and carry out more complex attacks in Somalia and beyond.<sup>69</sup>

In 2009, Kenya was planning to invade southern Somalia for reasons grounded in economic, security and political agendas.<sup>70</sup> Kenya has historically punched below its weight in terms of influencing regional geopolitics and was often perceived as a reluctant power.<sup>71</sup> In 2011, several kidnappings of tourists and foreign aid workers inside Kenya were subsequently attributed to Al-Shabaab. Kenya used these attacks as a pretext to send its troops to southern Somalia unilaterally.<sup>72</sup> The incursion, codenamed Operation "Linda Nchi—Protect the Country," seemingly consisted of a three-fold mission: to establish a client state (Jubbaland) to form a bulwark buffer zone against any spillover of insecurity, to degrade Al-Shabaab, and to signal its regional rivals about its capabilities to become the region's dominant power.<sup>73</sup> Al-Shabaab denied any links to the kidnappings,<sup>74</sup> and threatened deadly attacks in retaliation to the invasion, vowing that they "shall come into Kenya" if Kenyan forces "do not retreat," risking a costly spillover of Somalia's war into Kenya.<sup>75</sup> Al-Shabaab established a "new frontier" in Kenya with a Kenyan as the head,<sup>76</sup> and has since staged terrorist operations (see [Figure 1](#)) in various parts of the country with the goal of forcing Kenya to withdraw its military forces from Somalia.

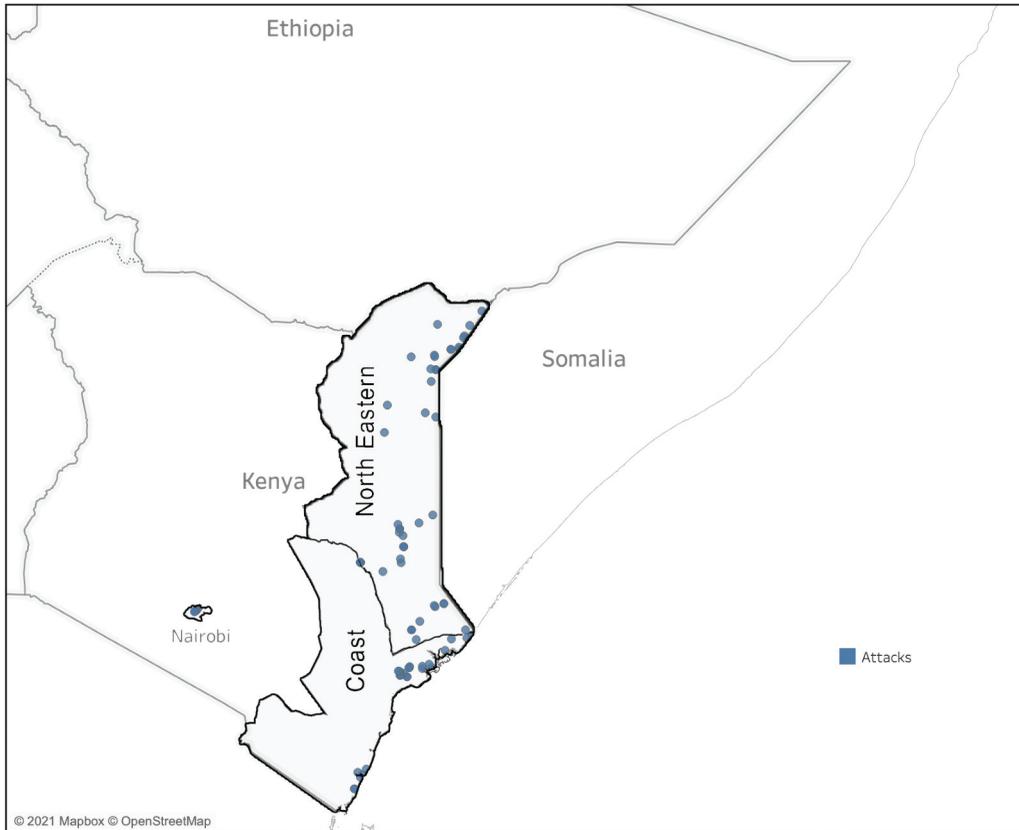
This section presents the results of the analysis, dividing Al-Shabaab's terrorism campaign in Kenya into major and minor terrorist attacks, and then provides an overview of each type of terrorist attack, the underlying strategic logic (i.e., oriented towards a process or outcome goal) behind it, and the effect it had on the intended audience (see [Table 2](#)).

### **Major terrorist attacks**

#### **Attacks**

Al-Shabaab's symbolic footprint in Kenya is reflected in the major terrorist attacks it carries out, which often dominate media and national discourse. By the end of 2019, Al-Shabaab had conducted five major terrorist attacks that claimed the lives of at least 332 people (see [Table 3](#)) in Kenya. What distinguishes the group's major from minor attacks is the level of sensationalism and the extent of national and global media coverage. The Westgate shopping centre and the DusitD2 business complex both represented high-value targets for Al-Shabaab, primarily because they are frequented by professionals, government officials, and foreigners. The Garissa University and Mpeketoni coast attacks fuelled Al-Shabaab's propaganda, due to their severity and longevity. The Garissa University attack left 147 people dead and several others injured, and lasted for more than 12 hours, with gunmen holding over 700 students hostage, whilst the Mpeketoni coast attacks claimed the lives of almost 70 people and lasted 10 hours. Beyond the loss of life, the major attacks inflicted considerable harm on Kenya's society and economy. All attacks induced market uncertainty, xenophobia, loss of tourism, and foreign direct investment.<sup>77</sup>

In contrast to minor terrorist attacks, Al-Shabaab publicly released propaganda videos after the spectacular attacks (with the exception of the 2014 Koromei quarry attack) to send a warning to the Kenyan public, and even provided interviews to Western media. For instance, the group released a documentary-style film in February 2015 chronicling the September 2013 Westgate attack, threatening



**Figure 1.** Areas (Nairobi, Coast and North Eastern) primarily affected by Al-Shabaab’s operations. The North Eastern region in Kenya is comprised of Garissa, Wajir, and Mandera counties whilst the Coast region is comprised Lamu, Mombasa, Kilifi, Kwale, Tana River and Taita Taveta counties.

**Table 2.** The strategies underpinning Al-Shabaab’s major and minor terrorist attacks in Kenya.

Type of attack	Strategy	Audience	Intended outcome/process goal
Major terrorist attacks	Attrition	Kenyan populace	Influence Kenyan public to pressure their government to withdraw troops from Somalia
Minor terrorist attacks	Provocation	Kenyan government	Violent state repression targeting Somali and Muslim communities in Kenya, leading to fresh recruits for Al-Shabaab

**Table 3.** Major terrorist attacks in Kenya conducted by Al-Shabaab between 2011 and 2019.

Date	Location	Town/City/County	Region	Deaths	Claimed responsibility?
21–24 September 2013	Westgate shopping centre	Nairobi	Nairobi	67+	Yes
15–17 June 2014	Mpeketoni	Mpeketoni	Coast	60+	Yes
2 December 2014	Koromei	Mandera County	North Eastern	36	Yes
2 April 2015	Garissa University	Garissa	North Eastern	148	Yes
15–16 January 2019	DusitD2 complex	Nairobi	Nairobi	21	Yes

more “Westgate-style” attacks in and beyond Kenya. Furthermore, Al-Shabaab’s long-time spokesperson, Sheikh Ali Dheere, gave an exclusive interview to U.K.-based Channel 4, stating that Al-Shabaab specifically targeted the Westgate shopping centre, primarily because it is “a place where they feel the most pain” and that the group wants “to reach every Kenyan.”<sup>78</sup> Similarly, Al-Shabaab’s leader,

Ahmed Abdi Godane, released a statement following the Westgate attack, threatening Kenya and warning it to prepare for a “war of attrition” if it did not “withdraw all your forces.”<sup>79</sup> Similar statements and videos “punishing” ordinary Kenyans “for failing to speak out against their government’s oppressive policies” were re-iterated following the April 2015 Garissa University massacre and the June 2015 Mpeketoni attacks.<sup>80</sup> Strikingly, Al-Shabaab’s official response to the Garissa massacre dedicated only two lines to the Kenyan government but at least five paragraphs to the Kenyan public, explicitly stating:

We have repeatedly warned you that the actions of your government will not be without retaliation. Choices have consequences; you chose your government out of your own volition so endure the consequences of your actions for you will bear the full brunt of its follies. Not only are you condoning your government’s oppressive policies by failing to speak out against them but are reinforcing their policies by electing them. You will, therefore, pay the price with your blood.<sup>81</sup>

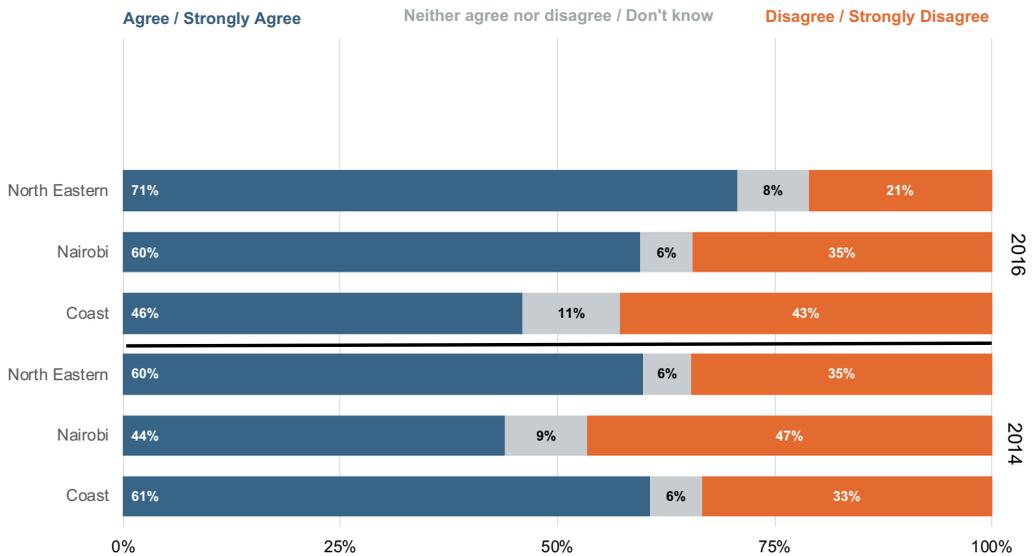
The group declared, however, that the January 2019 DusitD2 attack was in response to the U.S. government’s decision to recognise the contested city of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.<sup>82</sup>

In interviews conducted for this study, multiple Al-Shabaab defectors revealed that the major attacks in Kenya were based on a high degree of meticulous planning and the injection of substantial resources to force Kenya to end its military occupation in southern Somalia. Indeed, all their major operations rested on a singular strategy, which was to show strength through spectacular attacks (Al-Shabaab defectors, Mogadishu, March 2019). A high-ranking Al-Shabaab defector revealed that through “showing strength by conducting large attacks, we made sure that they were not fighting an insignificant organisation, especially the Kenyan people, and we reflected that in our media strategy to remind them of that.” He further added that “our large attacks demonstrate the weakness of the Kenyan government, that they cannot protect their own citizens but are willing to invade our country and terrorise our homeland” (Khalaf, Mogadishu, March 2019). Furthermore, virtually all the former Al-Shabaab respondents (94 percent) expressed the sentiment that rested on the proposition that an increase in major attacks would turn the Kenyan public opinion against KDF’s presence in Somalia and demand troop withdrawal from Somalia (Al-Shabaab defectors, Mogadishu, March 2019).

### *Effect on the intended audience*

Al-Shabaab’s major terrorist attacks unveiled the level of incompetence of Kenya’s security forces, as they mounted a chaotic and slow response to the attacks. Whilst Al-Shabaab’s spectacular attacks displayed a high level of sophistication and inflicted high costs, Kenya’s security forces were severely criticised by both the public and oversight agencies for their botched response.<sup>83</sup> For instance, during the Westgate attack, distrust between the military and police fuelled the slow handling of the rescue operation. Furthermore, when the military was sent in, many soldiers were captured on camera looting almost every shop whilst the shopping centre was besieged.<sup>84</sup> The United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea blamed Kenya for failing to act on credible security intelligence about an imminent attack on Garissa University and criticised the security forces’ chaotic response,<sup>85</sup> a claim acknowledged by the Kenyan government, which in turn fuelled public anger and incited anti-government protests.<sup>86</sup> Similar protests motivated by Kenyan security services’ slow response were held following the Mpeketoni attacks<sup>87</sup> and the DusitD2 attack.<sup>88</sup> Yet it was only in the aftermath of the Koromei quarry massacre, in early December 2014, that the country’s two top security officials were summarily dismissed.<sup>89</sup> The Koromei quarry massacre reinforced public demands “that the country withdraws its troops from Somalia,” and major Kenyan newspapers adopted an editorial stance that amplified this growing sentiment.<sup>90</sup>

Whilst public opinion is difficult to gauge in Kenya, given the lack of consistent public polling, some basic trends can be discerned regarding how the public attitude shifted following these major attacks. Before Al-Shabaab had carried out any major attacks in Kenya, a Pew Research survey published in March 2013 illustrated that approximately 55 percent of Kenyans believed that terrorism constituted a major threat to the country, and a 2012 survey demonstrated that Kenyans overwhelmingly (82 percent) supported the country’s military intervention in Somalia.<sup>91</sup>



**Figure 2.** The KDF should pull out of Somalia—based on survey data obtained from Afrobarometer.com.

However, directly following the first major attack post-Kenyan invasion, the 2013 Westgate attack, discussions on Kenya's presence in Somalia began to emerge in public and private circles.<sup>92</sup> Following the June 2014 Mpeketoni massacres, parliamentary members and civilians staged protests calling for the withdrawal of Kenya's forces from Somalia.<sup>93</sup> Nationwide surveys conducted in November and December 2014 by the Afrobarometer measured the attitudes of ordinary Kenyans by asking them whether Kenya should withdraw its forces from Somalia. In 2014, only 48 percent of Kenyans agreed with military withdrawal, whilst 43 percent disagreed.<sup>94</sup> Looking more closely at the areas where Al-Shabaab had staged major terrorist attacks (see Figure 2), the results revealed that the majority of residents in the North Eastern (60 percent) and Coast (61 percent) regions felt that Kenya should withdraw its forces from Somalia, whilst only 44 percent of residents in Nairobi agreed with that sentiment.

In 2016, the responses to the same question revealed differences in attitudes. In response to whether Kenya should withdraw its forces from Somalia, there was no significant difference in the nationwide attitudes concerning troop withdrawal in comparison to the 2014 results, with 50 percent agreeing with troop withdrawal (a 2 percent increase compared to the 2014 results) and only 40 percent disagreeing. However, when disaggregating the results to the areas directly affected by Al-Shabaab's major operations, an increase in support for KDF's withdrawal can be seen in Nairobi and the North Eastern region. Around 60 percent of residents in Nairobi strongly supported a withdrawal, compared to 44 percent in the 2014 survey, and in the North Eastern region, the majority of respondents (71 percent—an increase of 11 percent) expressed support for Kenya's withdrawal. However, residents in the Coast demonstrated a reversal; whilst the majority (60 percent) supported KDF's withdrawal from Somalia in late 2014; in 2016, only 46 percent supported the withdrawal.

## Minor terrorist attacks

### Attacks

Since 2011, a total of 205 minor terrorist attacks have been attributed to Al-Shabaab. The majority were executed in the North Eastern region (63 percent), with the Coast region second (27 percent) and Nairobi being the least targeted (10 percent) (see Figure 3). The years 2014 and 2017 proved to be Al-Shabaab's most active, as the group averaged three to four operations a month. By contrast, in other years they averaged between one or two operations per month. More than a third of these operations (37 percent)

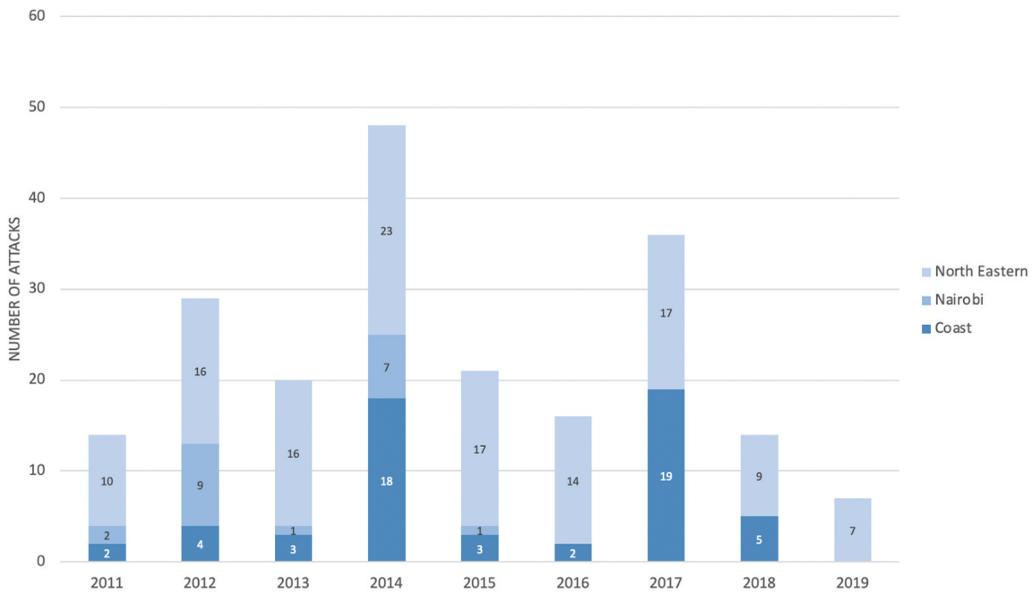


Figure 3. Minor terrorist attacks carried out in Kenya by Al-Shabaab.

comprised of bombings aimed at civilian spaces, mainly landmines, grenades, and improvised devices. One pertinent example is the Bisharo Guest House attack in Mandera town, where Al-Shabaab threw grenades that killed 12 civilians.<sup>95</sup> Armed attacks (33 percent) were the second most utilised tactic, where Al-Shabaab gunmen storm civilian sites. One example is the Malleley mosque attack near the border town of Liboi; Al-Shabaab stormed the mosque and fired indiscriminately, killing seven civilians.<sup>96</sup> Finally, civilian kidnappings (i.e. kidnapping for ransom) accounted for 14 percent of Al-Shabaab’s minor terrorist attacks, with the group often kidnapping foreign tourists and aid workers. A pertinent example is the kidnapping of two Cuban doctors in April 2019.<sup>97</sup>

The Al-Shabaab defectors interviewed in this study highlighted that attacking civilian spaces in remote places and main towns was a dual strategy intended to provoke the enemy into expanding its “oppressive measures” against the Kenyan Muslim community and sending a wake-up call to Kenyan Muslims that state oppression will only get considerably worse if they do not rebel against the Kenyan government (Al-Shabaab defectors, Mogadishu, March 2019). One former Al-Shabaab fighter, who participated in some of these attacks, acknowledged that they “specifically target Muslim-populated areas [Eastleigh in Nairobi and the borderlands regions] because the [Kenyan] government sees all Kenyan Muslims as second-class citizens and potential Al-Shabaab supporters and we knew that these factors would guarantee unjustified harm against their innocent Muslim citizens” (Aden, Mogadishu, March 2019). He further added that Kenya “had done this in the past,” before Al-Shabaab made its entrance in Kenya, “by raiding mosques, murdering civilian leaders, and treating Muslims as second-class citizens. All we were doing is pushing that to the fore, to show the reality not only to non-Muslim Kenyans but to Muslim Kenyans who refused to accept [the reality]” (Aden, Mogadishu, March 2019). On several occasions, multiple respondents drew parallels with how authorities responded to past rebellions in Kenya, citing the Kikuyu *Mau Mau* uprising and the Somali *Shifto* insurgency in the 1950s and 1960s, and maintaining that whoever rules Kenya, whether it is the British colonial government or the Kenyan government, they have a tendency to pursue collective punishment strategies that only exacerbate existing fissures within the Kenyan society, which then leads to mobilisation of the Kenyan public (Multiple Al-Shabaab defectors, Mogadishu, March 2019).

### *Effect on the intended audience*

Al-Shabaab's minor terrorist attacks in Kenya prompted the government to mete out draconian punishments—including collective punishment, extrajudicial killings, mass arrests and detention—to Somali and Muslim communities in Kenya. Multiple residents in the North Eastern region interviewed for this study stated that they fear the Kenyan military more than Al-Shabaab because once Al-Shabaab executes a terrorist attack on Kenyan soil, the Kenyan military lashes out by specifically targeting innocent locals (Residents, Mandera and Garissa, June 2019). In Nairobi, human rights reports highlighted that, in the days following a series of minor terrorist attacks in November and December 2012, the Kenyan police went on a “rampage, torturing, raping, assaulting, extorting, and arbitrarily detaining” Somali refugees and Kenyan Somalis.<sup>98</sup>

In late March 2014, a series of minor attacks targeting a local church in Mombasa, and a bus stop and a food kiosk in Eastleigh, prompted the Kenyan government to launch Operation Usalama Watch, in which 6,000 security officers were deployed in Eastleigh, the Nairobi neighbourhood where most Somalis live, and parts of Mombasa. The operation ostensibly targeted “foreign nationals” who were in the country unlawfully, and anyone suspected of “terrorist links.” However, in practice, press reports illustrated that the operation flagrantly targeted ethnic Somalis and Muslim populations in Nairobi and Mombasa. Many Kenyan Somalis felt hopeless, with one Nairobi resident highlighting that “Al-Shabaab attacks Somali-populated areas and kills us yet instead of our police protecting us, they are punishing us because we are Somalis and Muslims. We feel hopelessly stuck and are forced to take both punishments [from Al-Shabaab and Kenya's security forces]” (Galwaq, Nairobi, April 2019). International organisations documented credible cases of Kenyan security forces raiding homes, looting goods, and harassing and extorting money from Kenyan Somalis and Somali refugees.<sup>99</sup> Similar cases were documented following Operation Usalama Watch, resulting in 1,000 Somali refugees being “forcibly relocated to overcrowded, insecure refugee camps in northern Kenya, and many children separated from their parents and breast-feeding women separated from their infants.”<sup>100</sup>

In the North Eastern region, the sentiment that the ethnic Somali community is being collectively punished for Al-Shabaab attacks is ubiquitous. Respondents in this study made a clear distinction regarding the government response following Al-Shabaab attacks, explained here by a Garissa resident:

When Al-Shabaab conducts large attacks like the Westgate or Garissa University attacks, the Kenyan public comes together in solidarity. Many Kenyan Somalis were seen as heroes for rescuing people, for example the Westgate terrorist attack, but the minute Al-Shabaab conducts these so-called not newsworthy attacks, of throwing a grenade at a small hotel or killing bus passengers, we get collectively punished (Farhiyo, Garissa, April 2019).

A Mandera resident described that, instead of Kenyan security forces pursuing “the perpetrators of the attacks in our region, they rounded up local Somalis or refugees and punished them, you cannot imagine the number of times I have been called a terrorist even though I am a law-abiding citizen” (Oday, Mandera, April 2019). Similar experiences were reported in interviews conducted by human rights organisations in Mandera, where one respondent recounted that, following a bomb blast in the town, the Kenyan military “were beating people with clubs.”<sup>101</sup> Another Mandera resident interviewed for this study considered the beatings that he experienced “mild” in comparison to what his relatives had experienced. He added that, once the Anti-Terrorism Police Unit (ATPU) “take you, you could either end up dead somewhere on a random road or disappear forever, with no trace of you” (Guled, Mandera, April 2019). The Kenyan media has reported extensively on the discovery of random shallow graves containing executed ethnic Somalis. One example is the July 2017 discovery of a shallow grave in Bambo town, which contained five bodies, including that of a woman. Relatives confirmed that they had been taken away by officers who introduced themselves as ATPU.<sup>102</sup> The vast majority of the North Eastern respondents (95 percent) interviewed for this study repeatedly stressed that they have “no love” for Al-Shabaab but are routinely labelled as “terrorists” because of their ethnic background and are subsequently targeted by the security forces in the aftermath of Al-Shabaab's minor attacks (Residents, Mandera and Garissa, May-June 2019). A similar sentiment was expressed

by As Saleh Sheikh, when he explained to the International Crisis Group in 2014 that every time “a terror incident happens in northern Kenya, the towns are deserted fearing violent retaliation and collective punishment from security forces. Security forces arrest everyone on the street without discrimination.”<sup>103</sup>

Finally, although interviewed residents for this study indicated that they were not Al-Shabaab sympathisers, however, the majority (75 percent) highlighted they know at least one relative or friend who has voluntarily joined Al-Shabaab to protect themselves against harsh state responses (Residents, Mandera and Garissa, June 2019). A Garissa resident described it as a case of “choosing the lesser of two evils,” and for many, Al-Shabaab is the “lesser evil” (Arawelo, Garissa, April 2019). Similarly, a Mandera resident recounted how the security forces routinely harassed his “innocent cousin after they falsely accused him [his cousin] of being an Al-Shabaab sympathiser.” He added that in the end, “no matter what his cousin did, in their eyes, he was an Al-Shabaab sympathiser and would never leave him alone so he joined Al-Shabaab” (Abib, Mandera, April 2019).

## Discussion

Transnational terrorism is a strategic activity adopted in response to the specific actions of a targeted state and, in theory, functions as a communication strategy that signals to the target country the costs of noncompliance. This study has empirically investigated the different terrorist strategies underpinning Al-Shabaab’s transnational terrorist campaign in Kenya and the effect these had on the intended audiences. The findings have revealed that Al-Shabaab’s disparate terrorist operations in Kenya are motivated by two primary strategies: attrition and provocation. The first strategy (attrition) was reflected in Al-Shabaab’s major terrorist attacks in Kenya, which served to foment fear and anti-war views in the Kenyan public, and exerted significant pressure on the Kenyan government to withdraw troops from Somalia. The second strategy (provocation) was accentuated in Al-Shabaab’s minor terrorist attacks in Kenya, as the group tried to goad and induce a repressive government response against Kenya’s Somali and Muslim communities. Whilst Al-Shabaab did succeed in actively influencing the Kenyan public mood, this proved to be counterproductive as the Kenyan government remained consistent and grew increasingly obstinate following each major terrorist attack, for reasons that will be expounded in the next subsection. The minor terrorist attacks, however, did produce the intended results, as the Kenyan government unleashed cyclical waves of violent repression and draconian measures targeting Kenya’s Somali and Muslim communities, which in turn increased Al-Shabaab’s recruits.

### *Attrition strategy*

The results have further revealed that Al-Shabaab’s major terrorist operations were chiefly underpinned by the attrition strategy. Whilst Al-Shabaab publicly declared that their most deadly attacks were an act of retribution for Kenya’s involvement in Somalia, scholars’ and commentators’ evaluations of the strategies underlying the attacks have been mixed. Some have surmised that Al-Shabaab’s rationale for these major terrorist attacks was to elicit a violent overreaction from the Kenyan government against ethnic Somalis and Kenyan Muslims,<sup>104</sup> whilst others contended that it was chiefly driven by a quest for relevancy and an effort to deepen ties with the “global jihad” network.<sup>105</sup> The results of this study, however, suggest that Al-Shabaab’s major attacks were intended to gauge the level of tolerance for the increasing human costs, and to highlight and mock the ineptitude of the Kenyan security apparatus, demonstrating to the Kenyan public that they were akin to sitting ducks, unprotected from the consequences of their government’s foreign policy. More specifically, the results have highlighted that Al-Shabaab’s intended audience was not the Kenyan government or the West, as previously assumed by aforementioned commentators, but the Kenyan populace. Indeed, in trying to determine whom Al-Shabaab was seeking to reach, Mair’s analysis of Al-Shabaab’s live Twitter output during the Westgate attack revealed that the Kenyan population was by

far the primary demographic, responsible for 441 out of 556 tweets.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, Al-Shabaab's official statements in response to their major terrorist operations—with the exception of the DustitD2 major attack—were primarily aimed at the Kenyan public. This intended signalling by Al-Shabaab was not lost on the Kenyan public, with some scholars observing that “the horrors of the civilian deaths at Westgate, and the seeming incompetence of their security forces . . . made the Kenyan public come to terms with the fact that they really were at war.”<sup>107</sup> In many respects, the attrition strategy adopted by Al-Shabaab mirrors the preferred strategy of Al-Shabaab's umbrella organisation, Al Qaeda. Novenario found evidence that Al Qaeda “consistently employs attrition to compel changes in the West's policy and behavior.”<sup>108</sup> Documents found in bin Laden's Abbottabad compound after he was killed reveal that Al Qaeda's founding ideologue “predicted that in the wake of the [9/11 attrition-based] attack, the American people would take to the streets, replicating the protests against the Vietnam War and calling on their government to withdraw from Muslim-majority countries.”<sup>109</sup> Indeed, the group was keenly aware of the role that U.S. domestic pressure could play in making this attrition strategy successful. Moreover,

What impact did Al-Shabaab's attrition strategy have? Al-Shabaab's major attacks successfully influenced public mood by exposing the seeming incompetence of Kenyan security forces, which promulgated perpetual anxiety and a sense of insecurity amongst ordinary citizens, including expats.<sup>110</sup> Kenya expert, Anderson, highlighted in 2015 that “Kenyan security forces are not trained or equipped to deal with the threat that they now face . . . they are inefficient, corrupt and incompetent.”<sup>111</sup> The pervasive fear felt by the Kenyan public and the growing distrust in the security forces arguably influenced the increasing calls for withdrawal from Somalia so that Al-Shabaab attacks would stop. The national survey results revealed that, whilst over 80 percent of the Kenyan population initially supported Kenya's incursion into Somalia, this support decreased in 2014 (a year after the Westgate attack), and decreased further in 2016 (a year after the Garissa University massacre). Unsurprisingly, there was an increase in calls for troop withdrawal from the areas most directly affected by Al-Shabaab's major operations, with 60 percent of residents in Nairobi strongly supporting a withdrawal in 2016 compared to 44 percent in the 2014 survey, and an increase to 71 percent in 2016 for North Eastern residents, from 60 percent in 2014. Whilst support for Kenya's mission in Somalia decreased significantly in Nairobi following the attacks, this did not translate into a majority view of withdrawal (>50 percent) until 2016, three years after the Westgate attack. This change in public mood can be explained by the perpetual fear triggered by the Westgate attack, and major attacks elsewhere in Kenya. For instance, in 2015, a deadly stampede ensued after students in a Nairobi university mistook a loud blast caused by an electrical fault for a terrorist attack.<sup>112</sup> This climate of fear was emphasised in a 2016 Pew Research survey, in which Kenyans reported feeling largely pessimistic about the abating of terrorism in Kenya.<sup>113</sup>

Surprisingly, in 2016, only 46 percent of residents in the Coast supported troop withdrawal, a significant drop from 61 percent in 2014. This change can be partly explained by the increased security and the religious and ethnic fault lines in the area. The 2014 Mpeketoni attack in the Coast primarily targeted Kikuyu Christians, who are perceived as “outsiders” and “squatters” by the locals, having allegedly been settled as a result of favouritism by Kenya's first president—an ethnic Kikuyu—as part of a post-independence land settlement scheme. The incumbent president, Kenyatta, an ethnic Kikuyu himself, blamed the attack on local politics and accorded special treatment to the area, bypassing parliament and deploying large contingents of (mostly Christian) security forces in the area.<sup>114</sup> The sustained and sizable security presence in the Coast region—a feature absent in the neighbouring North Eastern region—most likely neutralised Al-Shabaab's attrition strategy, with locals feeling “safe and cushioned,” with their perceived fear allayed by the increased security presence.<sup>115</sup> This perceived safety is reflected in the reduced number of Al-Shabaab attacks in the Coast region, with no major attacks since 2014 and a considerable decrease in minor attacks (from 18 minor terrorist attacks in 2014 to just two minor terrorist attacks in 2016). There is, however, an uptick in violence for the year 2017 but this is related to Al-Shabaab response to the hotly-contested 2017 general elections. Embattled terrorist groups often increase their tempo of attacks in the months leading to the election date.<sup>116</sup>

Whilst Al-Shabaab's attrition strategy actively swayed Kenyan public opinion and fomented increasing anti-war views among the public; the Kenyan government adopted a more intransigent stance by gradually expanding its military footprint in Somalia, including an uptick in airstrikes targeting suspected Al-Shabaab camps in Somalia.<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, Kenyan President Kenyatta persistently vowed not to withdraw, in defiance of the mounting public demand and similar calls from Kenyan politicians. In Somalia, Kenya discounted an approved motion by the Somali parliament to evict Kenyan troops.<sup>118</sup> Unsurprisingly, the Kenyan government rhetoric mirrored the Ugandan President, Museveni's response, who answered Al-Shabaab's 2010 twin bombing in Kampala with the deployment of 2,000 additional troops in Somalia, even though public opinion was increasingly shifting towards the withdrawal of troops from Somalia.<sup>119</sup> Thus, it seems Al-Shabaab miscalculated the level of influence domestic pressure would have on the Kenyan government. Al-Shabaab had hoped to achieve a similar strategic outcome as witnessed in the aftermath of the 2004 Madrid train bombings, which led to the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq. The primary "objective of the perpetrators was to compel Spain to end its military support for the U.S.-led occupations in Afghanistan and especially Iraq."<sup>120</sup> Although the Madrid attack did not compel the Spanish government at the time to change its policy, it did sway public opinion by mobilising voters to elect a new government that would "pull Spanish troops from Iraq."<sup>121</sup> Indeed, democracies often have to convince the electorate to support prolonged wars,<sup>122</sup> though Kenya is not a full democracy but a transitioning democracy that retains significant autocratic elements.<sup>123</sup>

The Kenyan government's apathy toward public sentiment is arguably entrenched in strong motives of self-interest. First, the Kenyan state is hoping to create an ambitious "transport corridor" across Kenya, a US\$22 billion transport network that includes a 32-berth port, highways, railways, and pipelines; any insecurity spillover could potentially derail the project. Second, Kenya has issued oil exploration licences in several off-shore blocks within its disputed maritime waters (claimed by Somalia) and continues to support the unpopular and contentious proxy Jubbaland administration it installed in 2011. Lastly, credible reports implicating senior Kenyan politicians and military officials in the acceptance of tens of millions of dollars a year from taxing illicit trade in charcoal and sugar in Somalia, continue to dominate Kenya's operations in Somalia—ironically, this is the same illicit trade that sustains Al-Shabaab.<sup>124</sup>

In sum, nine years after Kenya invaded southern Somalia and multiple major terrorist operations later, Al-Shabaab's attrition strategy has failed to translate into the realisation of the group's ultimate outcome and has instead actively increased the resolve of the Kenyan government. This finding lends some credence to and is congruent with burgeoning literature arguing that "terrorism is ineffective for achieving outcome goals" but is, conversely, "effective for achieving process goals."<sup>125</sup>

### **Provocation**

The results have revealed that Al-Shabaab's minor terrorist operations were primarily underpinned by a deliberate strategy of provocation, motivated by a dual aim of provoking the Kenyan authorities to mete out state repression against Al-Shabaab's envisaged constituency, and exploit the resultant vengeful atmosphere by supplementing their rank and file with radicalised members. Al-Shabaab defectors in this study cited parallel examples of this strategy being applied, including Kenya's past rebellions (*Mau Mau* and the *Shifita*), emphasising that "whoever rules Kenya," they tend to respond "harshly and violently" to any attacks that are carried out and that Al-Shabaab aims to elicit such responses. Al-Shabaab's history-based reasoning does have merit. The use of collective punishment began under British rule as a strategy designed to control the African population and was central to British counterinsurgency during the 1950s Mau Mau Uprising. Whittaker argued that the "institutional continuities" of "collective punishment and state violence" are not a "colonial hangover" but a system that "began under British administration" and was then "entrenched and expanded by the postcolonial state."<sup>126</sup> The Kenyan state has long institutionalised the marginalisation of its Muslim citizens, more specifically Kenyan Somalis and Somali refugees.<sup>127</sup> Indeed, whilst Kenya is nominally

secular, in practice it is a “Christian” state.<sup>128</sup> Al-Shabaab is acutely aware of this practice and, as a result, repeatedly incorporates the narratives of perennial economic and social grievances suffered by Kenya’s Muslim communities in its media campaigns in order to promote their movement in Kenya.<sup>129</sup> Since 2011, Al-Shabaab has carried out 205 minor terrorist attacks, with the vast majority (90 percent) of these being concentrated in Muslim-majority areas of Kenya—the north-eastern and coastal areas. Basque separatist group ETA employed a similar strategy between 1968 and 1975, where it carried out the majority of its terrorist attacks in Basque Country, with the intent to provoke the Spanish government into excessive and non-discriminatory retaliation against all Basque residents.<sup>130</sup>

The Kenyan state’s response to Al-Shabaab’s minor terrorist operations has been harsh and unequivocal. Respondents interviewed for this study, and a growing number of press reports emphasised the repressive measures and serious human rights abuses that were routinely enforced against Kenyan Muslims, chiefly Kenyan Somalis and Somali refugees, following Al-Shabaab’s minor attacks.<sup>131</sup> Somali refugees were the first casualties of the ensuing overreactions, and have been explicitly blamed by the Kenyan authorities for a spate of minor terrorist activities. Almost 60,000 mostly Somali asylum seekers and refugees in Nairobi were required to move to the country’s closed-off and overcrowded refugee camps or face forced relocation.<sup>132</sup> Whilst respondents in this study indicated that they generally did not witness heightened persecution following Al-Shabaab’s larger operations in Kenya, they had witnessed and experienced blanket arrests, extrajudicial killings, rapes, beatings, and high levels of theft and extortion following minor terrorist attacks. Lind et al. argued that threats to peace and security in Kenya’s Muslim-majority areas are closely linked to legacies of state violence and historical injustices,<sup>133</sup> and a growing corpus of studies has intrinsically linked the Kenyan state’s securitisation response to perennial grievances.<sup>134</sup> The Kenyan state does indeed have a long history of violently dispensing collective punishment against the Muslim minority. In the early 1960s, to “discipline” the Somali-dominated north for voting to secede and staging violent protests and attacks on Kenyan authorities, the Kenyan authorities retaliated with a severely disproportionate succession of massacres, forced resettlements and starvation camps for Kenyan Somalis.<sup>135</sup>

Transnational terrorism has long been associated with a strategy of provocation,<sup>136</sup> and several empirical studies have evidenced that transnational terrorism often results in the use of state terror.<sup>137</sup> In explaining why some states respond with terrorism, Blankenship argued that governments with limited bureaucratic capacities are prone to using repression in their response to terrorism, and Kenya—according to the author’s model—is regarded as a state with relatively low bureaucratic capacity.<sup>138</sup> Interestingly, alongside resultant state repression following minor Al-Shabaab attacks, sporadic and retaliatory communal violence against ethnic Somalis having been reported as a result of these attacks, with many blaming the ethnic Somali community for the spate of minor terrorist attacks in Kenya.<sup>139</sup> Whilst no Al-Shabaab defectors interviewed for this study mentioned inciting communal violence as being part of their strategy for minor attacks, this unintended but somewhat predictable response lends some preliminary credence to the emerging studies that explore how terrorism can provoke communal groups to carry out revenge violence against the imagined constituency of rebel groups.<sup>140</sup>

The primary end goal of Al-Shabaab’s provocation strategy was to attract radicalised civilians that had been brutally harmed by Kenya’s violent repression. Indeed, the Kenyan invasion of Somalia acted as a catalyst for an intensified and coordinated recruitment drive. The majority of residents (75 percent) interviewed for this study described stories of relatives and friends who joined Al-Shabaab to protect themselves against state repression. Existing studies that have explored the structural factors that motivated Kenyans to join Al-Shabaab have mainly emphasised the state’s “collective punishment” approach as the main driver. For example, Botha points out that the “majority of respondents referred to injustices at the hands of Kenyan security forces, specifically referring to ‘collective punishment’” and when respondents were told to highlight the most important factor that drove them to Al-Shabaab, “65 percent expressly referred to the government’s counterterrorism strategy.”<sup>141</sup> Scholars have identified that violation of physical integrity rights—rights that safeguard individuals from “extrajudicial murder, disappearance, torture, or political imprisonment by authorities”—consistently and substantially increases the incidence of terrorism.<sup>142</sup>

Indeed, the growing corpus of studies that examine Kenya's counterterrorism operations emphasises that the Kenyan government's securitised response had the counterproductive outcome of fuelling domestic radicalisation.<sup>143</sup> This point was saliently made by former U.S. President Obama during a visit to Kenya, when he highlighted that "if you paint any particular community with too broad a brush . . . then that can have the inadvertent effect of actually increasing the pool of recruits for terrorism and resentment in communities that feel marginalised."<sup>144</sup> Indeed, the Kashmir and Chechen insurgencies proliferated in size following overwhelming and indiscriminate state repression. This finding aligns with the broader literature that state repression can radicalise aggravated individuals in offering support to militant groups.<sup>145</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has advanced our understanding of the different strategies militant organisations embed in their transnational terrorist campaigns, and the findings add to the broader analytical literature on the strategic logic of terrorism. Scholars have long noted the dearth of studies that extend beyond examining patterns in target selection and attack methods to make accurate claims about terrorist strategies and goals.<sup>146</sup> For this study, the strategic motivations employed in Al-Shabaab's terrorist operations in Kenya were empirically investigated, and the resultant effects these had on the intended audiences were assessed. The core argument advanced was that Al-Shabaab employed disparate terrorist tactics in Kenya to further its process and outcome goals. The group's major terrorist operations were underpinned by the outcome goal of attrition and successfully influenced the Kenyan public's growing anti-war views, whilst the minor terrorist operations were motivated by the process goal of provoking a repressive state response, which was expected to take the form of harsh state repression and draconian measures targeting Kenya's Somali and Muslim minorities, which would ultimately exacerbate existing grievances and channel fresh recruits to Al-Shabaab. This study's findings contribute to the ongoing debate on whether terrorism helps the groups that employ it by demonstrating that "terrorism is ineffective for achieving outcome goals" but conversely is "effective for achieving process goals."<sup>147</sup>

While this article's argument has been limited to Kenya and Somalia, there is evidence that these findings are of global significance with similar settings throughout the world. Particularly in settings where militant groups are battling third-party military interventions and subsequently launch retaliatory transnational terrorist attacks against the intervening countries. For instance, the Mali-based *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin* (JNIM) periodically releases public statements linking their major terrorist attacks against French targets in the Sahel region to its overarching goal of forcing French troops to withdraw from Mali. Moreover, the group has appealed to the sympathy of the wider French public on several occasions to force their government to end the occupation in Mali.<sup>148</sup> The Nigeria-based Boko Haram group periodically conducts minor terrorist attacks against communities in Cameroon's Far North region. In response, the Cameroonian government engaged in human rights abuses against communities inhabiting Cameroon's Far North region—including collective punishment, extrajudicial executions and torture—thus fostering significant distrust between border communities and state authorities.<sup>149</sup>

These findings have implications for counterterrorism policies. Since militant organisations use different terrorist strategies to influence or provoke different audiences and are relatively successful, policymakers must consider effective and novel approaches *san* human rights violations to counter these strategies. Indeed, terrorism is a form of signalling and without aptly identifying the intended audiences of transnational terrorist operations, policymakers fall into the trap of using repression by pursuing counterproductive and violent countermeasures that unwittingly sustain militant organisations. In the case of Al-Shabaab's activities in Kenya, the militant group continues to shape the attitude and dynamics of diverse communities in Kenya. The Kenyan government's failure to mitigate major terrorist attacks and reactively deploy mismatched and ineffective countermeasures to Al-Shabaab's minor attacks will invariably aid Al-Shabaab's process goals and outcome goals.

Importantly, since states with weak institutions are prone to using repression after terrorist incidents, governments supporting low-capacity states could offer multi-dimensional assistance beyond the counterterrorism and securitisation dimensions. These dimensions exacerbate existing conditions instead of addressing the root causes of the various forms of marginalisation and discrimination experienced by segments of Al-Shabaab's envisaged constituency. A strategy aimed at countering Al-Shabaab's signalling and exploitation methods should incorporate a holistic and inclusive policy with a system focus that addresses regional disparities, and patterns of deep-rooted discrimination and inequality.

Whilst this article has explained the strategic motives anchoring Al-Shabaab's transnational terrorist campaign in Kenya, future research could benefit from more in-depth case studies in other similar settings that capture micro-level insights from militant actors regarding how they strategically utilise different terrorist strategies in their transnational campaigns.

## Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful suggestions and careful reading of the manuscript.

## Disclosure statement

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

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## Notes

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