

After deadly Al Shabab attack, questions about Kenya's approach

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November 24, 2014

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) The militant Islamist group Al Shabab attacked a bus in northeastern Kenya Saturday and murdered the 28 non-Muslim passengers on board.

Al Shabab said the attack was retaliation for police raids on mosques in the coastal city of Mombasa, which included the arrest of hundreds of young Muslim men and the temporary shutdown of four mosques there. The Kenyan Defense Forces responded to Saturday's attack by destroying the camp in Somalia from which it was launched.

The bus attack is a reminder that the government's heavy-handed tactics haven't worked. Al Shabab has only become more active in Kenya since Kenyan troops fought the group in Somalia in 2011.

But there is no indication the government is considering a change of course.

"To them that is what counterterrorism is," said Abdullahi Boru, a Kenyan Horn of Africa security analyst, referring to sweeping crackdowns. And those tactics have the backing of much of the population, which sees them as merely "robust," he said.

The bus attack comes amid growing insecurity in the county, with the military deployed in northwestern Kenya in response to banditry and attacks on police and violent clashes in the streets of Mombasa. The last 14 months included both the Westgate Mall attack that killed 67 and a string of attacks in coastal Lamu County that have killed close to 100 people.

"They will keep making the same mistakes—closing mosques, arresting Somalis. . . . They know the tactic is not working. They should look at other counterterror measures. . . . but there is no political goodwill to do that," said a former Kenyan security official who asked not to be named.

Harsh measures create fertile ground for Al Shabab to “endear” itself to aggrieved Muslims by claiming to be acting in their defense, as it did by calling the bus attack retaliation for the mosque raids, the former security official said. Down the line, it becomes easier for Al Shabab to recruit.

This is particularly true in marginalized areas such as Mandera, where the bus attack took place. Locals have had little relationship with the state since before independence. The border with Somalia is porous and barely monitored and the few police there are in the area are easily bribed.

Boru describes the border as Kenya’s “soft underbelly.”

The border has long been a major security risk for Kenya. An administrative police camp in Garissa has been overrun three times in three years, and the police presence remains thin. Despite warnings from local officials that a bus attack like this was imminent, hundreds of police were dispatched to Mombasa for the mosque raids instead of reinforcing the border, said Andrew Franklin, a security analyst in Nairobi.

"In Nairobi, the leadership does not see any reason to change its tactics, and they don't seem to be willing to accept that their tactics are not working," Franklin said. That “record of failure is beginning to give a fair degree of disquiet.”

But Boru warns that changes are unlikely because it's impossible to measure success or failure without a goal.

“After the attack it always comes back to ‘We will stay the course.’ When are we going to end? What is the plan? There is no end game.”